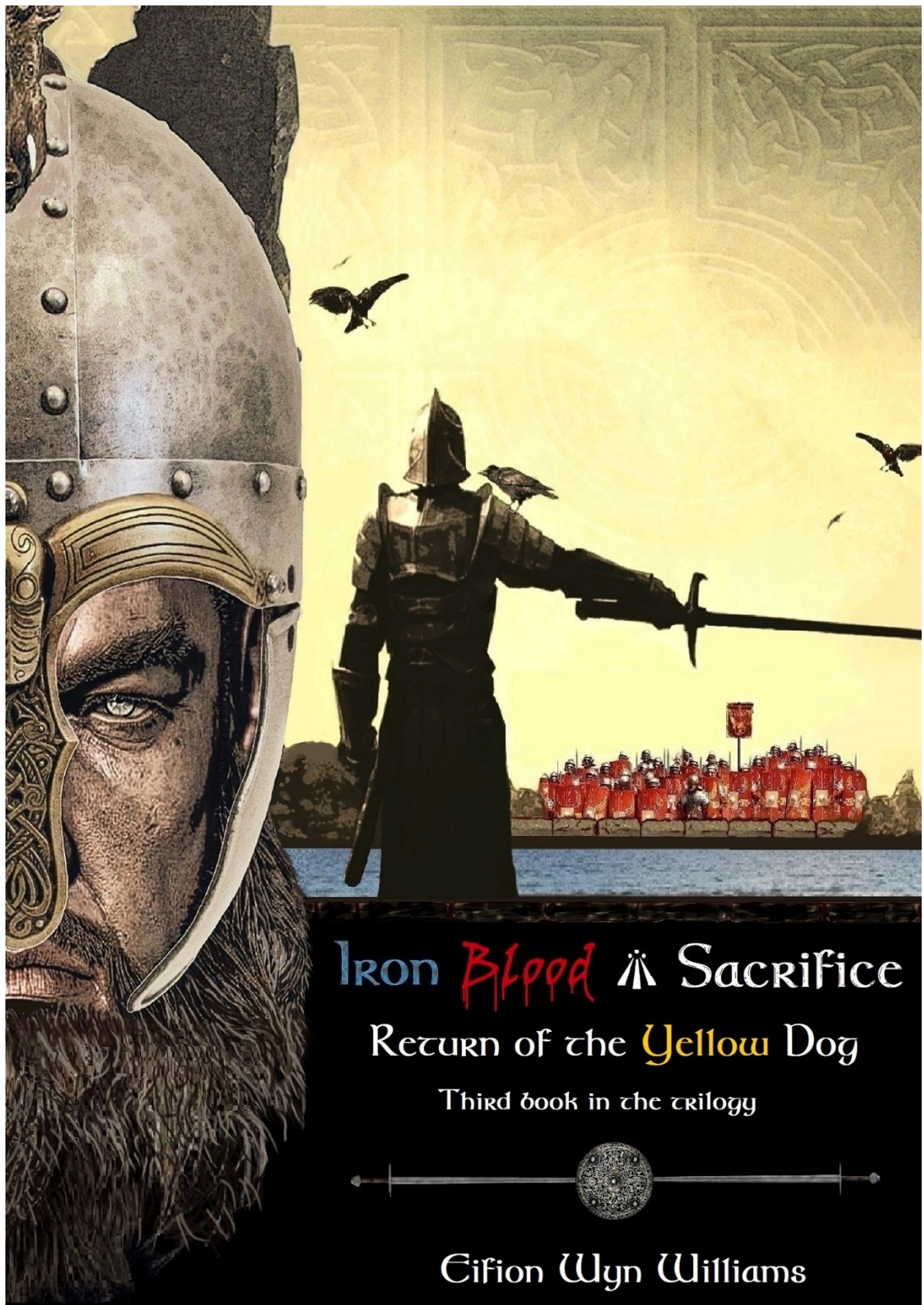


Iron Blood & Sacrifice (Return of the Yellow Dog).
Eifion Wyn Williams



Iron Blood & Sacrifice

Return of the Yellow Dog

Published by Eifion Wyn Williams

E-book Edition.

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To all my glorious ancestors and for my late father Huw Wyn Williams.
A quiet, poetic, and a thoughtful man of unique perception. A true
teacher.

Cwnfelyn Rhyfeinig



Yellow Dog of Rome.

There lay a fine southern fortress in a green misty vale, its high golden banners flying wild in this gale. It scattered the ravens who screeched of a slaughter, o'er a spirit-wreathed strait of cold iron water. On moonlit night the druids called out across their groves of oak, shrieking omens of deadly warning and of repeated, fatal stroke. For machine-like gelyn had come to conquer as they had before, and to butcher our humble werrin in service to their emperor.

Cold-eyed and grim-visaged was he, who came to conquer once before and to steal away a nation's *bri*. Famous offspring of a Roman born and the first of his brutish, alien name. Brought up to bold-suppose that bloody conquest through annihilation wins the game. A blood-soaked druid's changeling screams slashed harsh across that dome, to run and fly and to swim across the waves of channel heaving high, to where spirit's light gave fearful sight of horror yet to come.

Through towns and meagre villages the cold *milwr* of Rome they stormed; the people slain, their chattels burned with no pity earned, and no scrap of mercy did they gain. Swift they advanced to eviscerate, with eyes as sharp as their iron was cold, their aspects twisted with a familiar hate - so inveterate - so old. From their very souls the best of our brave men so cruelly were they shorn, and as the werrin wept their bitter tears, once more Arglwydd Prydein's grieving heart was torn.

Eifion Wyn Williams.

Return of the Yellow Dog - Preface.

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (Return of the Yellow Dog) is set in 54 BC and in Late, Pre-Roman, Iron-Age Britain. It outlines Julius Caesar's second, longer and marginally more successful invasion of Britain in that year. History as we know is written by the victor and Julius Caesar's history is a well-known Roman one. I hope this historically inspired novel; the last in the triad, will perhaps give the reader a taste of what may have been, the 'Brythonic' perspective of the same tumultuous period in our history.

The Sons of Beli Mawr were instrumental in the defence of Prydein at both Caesar's invasions, and they feature again in this 3rd novel. Beli and Dôn's children have become eternal legend, and these three remaining, magnificent warriors were the all-powerful Red Dragons of Prydein, to whom I pay honour and tribute in this book; Lludd 'Llaw Ereint' (silver hand), Caswallawn Fawr and King Llefelys of Armorica, who have all become the very cornerstones of Cymru's history, its culture, and its eternal memory.

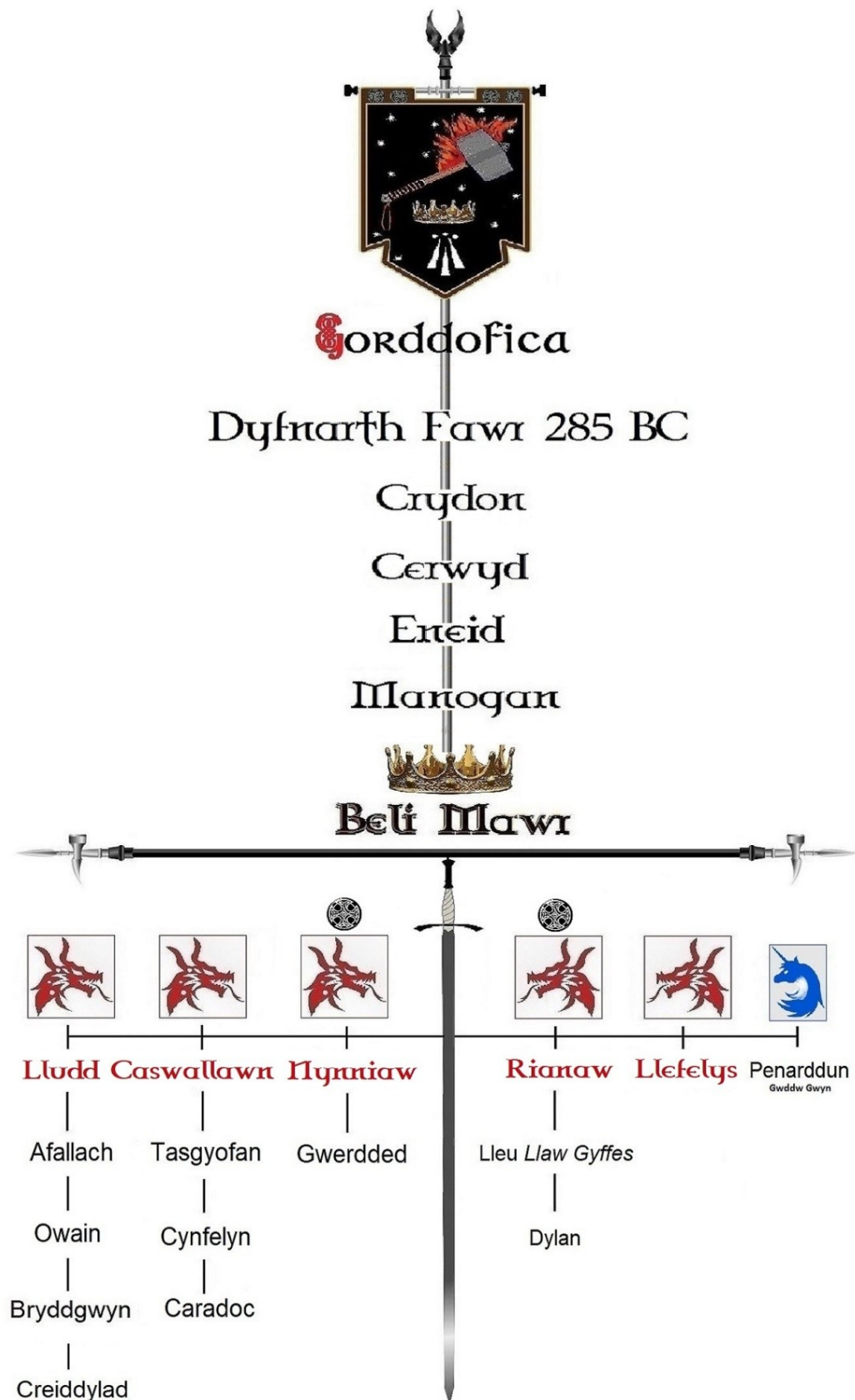
The storyline is based around the acknowledged happenings in this year, with real characters and locations, and I hope it reflects the known history. I hope too that I have captured the wild nature of the times in these novels, but they are at the end of the day works of fiction, inspired by my grandfather's old tales, my deeply honoured ancestors and their enduring culture. My retelling of these ancient and largely untold stories was constructed with the creative instincts and the deep influences of a proud Cymro, and I hope you enjoy reading them. The Return of The Yellow Dog (Cwnfelyn Rhyfeinig) is the third and final novel in the trilogy, 'Iron Blood & Sacrifice', encompassing Caesar's 2nd invasion and the frantic 'Southern' Brythonic defence of Prydein. It also follows the events which befall the characters already established in the 1st & 2nd Novels.

Please go to my website; <https://iffy88227.wixsite.com/sonsofbelimawr> to download the 78-page historic supplement to these novels, FREE of charge. There you can join my reader's membership, Q&A Forum and I have also posted a great many related photos, graphics, blogs and research material, which together give the reader a much clearer picture of the people, the culture and traditions in this ancient 'Brythonic' period.

My Pinterest page is also packed with further information along with thousands of photos and graphics, all relating to the books and the period;

<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/EifionWynWilliams/>

Eifion Wyn ap Huw Wyn ap John Wyn ap Elias Wyn - Williams.



IRON BLOOD + YAKMIRIKV

Iron Blood & Sacrifice



Iron Blood & Sacrifice (Return of the Yellow Dog).
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The Tribes of Prydain in 54 BC. (Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion)

- **Galedon (au)** (Ruling House of King Ederus - Stag)
- Galedon (au) (*Caledonii* - House of King Ederus - Stag)
- **Tawescally (au)** (*Taexali* - House of Prince Dylan - Vixen with Flaming Dagger)
- Fachomagia (u) (*Vacomagi* - House of Crown Prince Casnar - Skull)
- Wenyllon (au) (*Venicones* - House of King Lleu - Wren on Flaming Dagger)
- Epidia (u) (*Epidii* - *Unified* House of King Galan - White Stallion)
- Cornafa (u) Ddu (Black - Northern *Cornavii* - Gŵyr Brith - Battle Axe & Warhorn)
- **Albion (au)** (Ruling House of King Cridas - Boar)
- Selgofa (u) (*Selgovae* - House of King Cridas & Crown Prince Cadwy - Boar)
- Fotadina (u) (*Votadini/Otadini* - House of King Cenwydd - Sea Eagle)
- Newyddel (ly) ('Gŵyr Enouant' - *Novantae* - House of King Selwyn - Wildcat)
- Damnonia (u) (*Damnonii* - House of King Berwyn - Bear)
- **Breged (au)** (Ruling House of King Bellnor(ix) - Eagle)
- Breganta (u) (*Brigantes* - House of King Bellnor - Eagle)
- Carfeta (u) (*Carvetii* - Military House of *Cadlywydd* Cadallan - Leaping Deer)
- Lupocara (u) (*Lopocares* - House of Prince Tarwyn - Stalking Wolf)
- Cornafa (u) Calon (Central *Cornovii* - House of King Iddel - War Horn)
- Paurisa (u) (*Parisii* - House of Queen Morgu - Bronze Sword)
- Seganta (u) (*Setantii/Segantii* - House of King Seithenyn - Bow & Crossed Arrows)
- Gabrantofica (u) (*Gabrantovices* - Gŵyr Gofydd - Giant Oak Tree)
- Coritana (u) (*Coritani/Corieltauvii* - House of King Afyn - Rearing Viper)
- **Brython (au) Dde - Lloegr.** (Southern Brythons - House of King Caswallawn - Lynx)
- Casufelawny (au) (*Casuvellauni/Catuvellauni* - King Caswallawn - Lynx)
- Trinobanta (u) (*Trinobantes/Trinovantes* - King Afarwy - Triskele)
- Ecenia (u) (*Ecenii* - King Praswtag - Bull)
- Dobunny - (*Dobunii/Bodunni* - King Anted - Raven)
- Atrebata (u) (*Atrebates* - Prince Eppyll - Otter)
- Caint (au) (*Cantii/Cantiaci* - King Cyngetoric - Trident)
- Rhegin (au) (*Rhegni/Regnenses* - Prince Rathyeu - Buzzard)
- Belga (u) (*Belgae* - Prince Oretan - Cougar)
- Durotryga (u) (*Durotriges* - Prince Gwaedan - Falcon)
- Dufnonia (u) (*Dumnonii* - Prince Glannach - Mole)
- Cornafa (u) Dde (Southern *Cornovii* - Lord and General Dodion - Sword & War Horn)
- **Khumry** (Ruling House of High-King Lludd - Flaming War Hammer)
- Gangania (u) - (*Ganganii* - **King Guerthaeth** - Raven Head) → *Venedotia-Gwen*
- Decawangly (au) - (*Deceangli* - King Bryn (Deceased) - Mountain Eagle) ↗
- Gorddofica (u) Gogledd - (Northern *Ordovices* - King Gwerdded - War Hammer)
- Gorddofica (u) Dde - (Southern *Ordovices* - High-King Lludd - Flaming War Hammer)
- Essyllyr/Essyllwr - (*Silures* - Crown Prince Afalach - War Hammer & Red Dragon)
- Demeta (u) - (*Demetae* - King Brithael - Black Fox)
- Wythona (u) - (*Octapitae* - Gŵyr Galwyn - Eightfold Khumric Knot)



Chapter One.

Bathed in the most enervating and springtime sunlight, High King Lludd Llaw Ereint of Khumry along with his imposing nephew King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw finally arrived. They met the recently raised Gŵyr Olwydd Hîr and two more of the legendary ghost-warriors of Galedon a long way from their homes and here at their temporary woodland campsite in southwestern Prydein. This peaceful, spiritual forest was literally bursting with new life, and all manner of small creatures scurried around the camp whilst pine martens competed acrobatically amid the branches overhead with fit and agile red squirrels. Many species of birds flitted through these tall firs to the rattling knocks of distant woodpeckers, and this ancient woodland was surrounded by the very breadbasket of Durotryga's tribes. Mile after glorious square mile of vibrant green pasture stretched down to the southern coastal fringes to east and west, and as far as the eye could contain from this forest's edge. This verdant and scenic panorama reached all the way to the diamond dusted, azure sea in the distance, bathed in golden sunshine this beautiful day. Serried ranks of white-crested waves glittered this hazy seascape for miles ahead, diminishing inexorably until they vanished over the southern horizon of the great channel. With unseen Aremorica lying somewhere beyond, this vast stretch of water was abutted to an endless and pristine sky of the most exquisite blue. In this most striking part of the country which straddles the root of the great southwestern peninsula, the fields around were filled with lush and quickly growing crops. The great stock pens were bursting with fluffy white and black sheep or fat and ponderous, shaggy-brown cattle with huge and curving horns. The trefs and treflans of Durotryga had the sheen of prosperity on them, as did their eternally industrious and affluent inhabitants. The Durotrygau have become wealthy, fashionably well-appointed in their big homes and erudite, not just from cattle trading,

farming and mining but also from exporting their huge range of quality finished ware from pottery to jewellery, fine bronze castings and superb Brythonic armour. All of which are despatched over this broad channel to unseen Gallia and beyond from the long timber jetties and the broad wharves of Ynys Glâs, where the *werrin* also trade their wealth on exotic pieces for their homes and other such imported luxuries they have become accustomed to. That busy green island floats serenely in the protective embrace of the great Porth of Bwîl; that huge bowl of a harbour, twinkling now to the west along this southern coast and before the rising green hills in the far distance. These long-travelled Galedonian men had awaited these two Gorddofic kings here at this idyll for the last two days as Lludd and Gwerdded had been with the priests over the nearby border in King Anted's Dobunny, attending a huge religious festival there. Held at Anted's CaerFaddon; the fearsome fortress of the *Braniau Ddu* each year, these two Khumric lords' welcome would have been assured at that fortress of the legendary 'Black Raven Clan'. Having surely bathed in its private enclosure for the aristocracy, located right alongside the steaming marshes and the hot springs there they would have left it refreshed and relaxed. The conclave in that infamous fortress had ended over a day late, the added time being squandered by two great cabals of opposing druids, both taking centre-stage to vociferously argue their religious differences. Once Lludd and his nephew Gwerdded had escaped the confrontational confines of that religious assembly and were refreshed and rested, they had travelled south through the bounteous larder of the Dobunny's southern plains. The deeply mystical vale of Baddon lay only half a day's ride inland from Khumric facing CaerOdor at Aber Hafren, and it was well-known to these men as one of the holiest places in Prydein. It lay only a further day's ride to Lludd's great southern Khumric capital of CaerAu and so he was familiar with this whole western Lloegrian territory. King Anted's CaerFaddon and the capital of his Dobunny tribe lies in sight of the spiritual heart of that mythical vale, being the group of perpetually misted lakes of *Tardd* Faddon, from where Arglwydd Sulis had been summoned so long ago by Arglwydd Bel to patrol the skies each day as his wife and

queen. The first druids and their uati knew that Sulis' Portal, which lay at the very heart of that vapour-wreathed mere was an elemental vent in the earth's crust and that it reached down into the very bowels of this earth, down even to the *Black Lord's* lair. The modern-day druidry of Prydein still worship it above all other of their most sacred places, even the eternally consecrated Linn Tafwys in Trinobanta. On leaving the misty vale of Baddon and letting his mind roam freely as he rode easily in his comfortable and custom-made saddle, Lludd's thoughts had drifted to his new fortress in southeastern Prydein, and he had recalled every detail of his last visit to the Tafwys estuary with a sharp clarity as he rode south and he was proud to share these with his nephew as they journeyed together.

The magnificent reception chamber in the inner keep which he favoured had borne all the smells and hallmarks of its newness and its recent completion when he had last made use of it. Smiling indulgently to himself as he swayed naturally with this excellent horse's tempo, Lludd had seen in his mind's eye the posts and the oak frames, which were all still green on his last visit as no soot had yet spoiled those beautifully carved roof supports. The air had carried that vague but pleasing trace of pitch and sawn pine, and that acerbic *tang* had endured in his memory as he rode south alongside Gwerdded. Lludd had the stone-walled chamber he preferred for meetings made comfortable with the addition of thick sheepskin rugs around several long couches in the continental style, and he had a number of easy chairs brought in by his stewards for these meetings, which could be drawn around an enormous desk, and these comforts were clear in his mind, and he missed them. That burgeoning fortress and trading port he had built at such great personal cost, and which was growing with every hour of each day even in his absence lay *inside* the recently crowned King Afarwy's inviolate border, and it was only just beginning to show a profit. CaerLludd sat well within the truly ancient borders of Trinobanta and on an old, abandoned settlement from a time long ago, a time when Prince Brutus of Troy had arrived here to quell a countrywide civil war. Established as the capital city of Trinobanta in those

war riven years half a millennia earlier and becoming in time *Troya Newydd*, it had been a fantastic palace to that impressive noble when completed. The civil war between the five kings of Prydein had been initiated by a most dreadful epidemic, one which had ravaged the country from the high north to the southern shores. One of Prydein's three venerable arch-druids had been dispatched to Greece and to Athens in particular, where Arch-Druid Abaris made prayers and sacrifice to Apollo at his huge temple there. Hoping to sway the dreadful auguries at home with his sacrifices, Abaris was also tasked with finding and convincing Prince Brutus of Troy that he was the only man capable of quelling the internecine war which was destroying his country in the wake of all that sickness and death. Of the same bloodline as these desperate people through King Leir and responding to the desperate pleas of Prydein's druidry, Prince Brutus had journeyed to these isolated islands with his own noblemen and noblewomen to become King Brutus of Albion, and he had come to rule all Prydein very soon thereafter, establishing his line as the ruling elite of this great country of kingdoms. 'New Troy' had been erected on the estuary of Prydein's greatest river by Brutus himself, outside and below a spur of higher land which was now part of Casufelawny and Caswallawn's lands. Caswallawn's farmers had always made great use of their upper reaches of the Tafwys, but the people of what is now Casufelawny have no access to sea beyond that long lobe in their boundary. That narrow finger of their southernmost territory ended roughly three tantalising miles short of the great estuary, but only until this impressive and overly ambitious man decided that it was time for that situation to change. CaerLludd, and the burgeoning port of LludsDun around it had been built on Afarwy's land illegally, almost two years ago and whilst his late father Dunfallawn's throne lay empty. Along with Atrebata, Casufelawny had never possessed access to ocean, being the only two landlocked kingdoms in Prydein, but for a bard's memory, Casufelawny alone had been denied access to the marshlands and the oh-so-near estuary of Linn Tafwys. Trinobanta had always held stoutly onto that lucrative barrier of land, and that low marshland before the river was

in reality no more than a strip of boggy, midge-infested territory a few miles wide, but it had always effectively blocked Casufelawny's access to the Tafwys, the seas beyond her and all the bounty they could offer. Casufelawny had been denied that route to sea for many generations and Caswallawn had been held to ransom for his nation's trade for those same long and stifling years, but that short, inviting stretch of land had always offered him enticing views over the marshes, across the forbidden zone and down to that huge and sacred river. Ostensibly at least, Casufelawny still had no *official* access to her sanctified waters as CaerLludd or Lud's Dun as it was known locally had been built by this Khumric king, but only a fool would believe that minor technicality, especially as that borderline impediment to Casufelawny's growth had long irked the sons of Beli Mawr. Although a risky endeavour, Lludd Llaw Ereint was not known for his timidity and had taken rude advantage of the uncertainty caused by his brother's violent clearing of Trinobanta's throne. Curiously, the ancient boundary markers were found to be missing when sought out by one of Lludd's druids, but his persuasive patron had declared his blue-eyed innocence and then just assumed access. Once abandoned and left to the relentless reclamation powers of mother nature, that once royal playground around the old dun on its hill had become a deeply hated, mosquito-ridden swampland. It eventually became a curse of all Trinobanta's soldiers to patrol, known by them in recent generations as the 'carbuncle on the arse of the world' and a posting every man hoped to avoid. Following the death of King Dunfallawn, the imperative need to protect their boundary and the income from their exclusive access to the greatest votive river in Prydain had faded and slipped down Trinobanta's priorities. In a time when only fear had ruled that whole territory, the fractured group of nobles who had remained to govern the tribes until a new king took the throne did only what protected themselves and their own interests. So, with the political and military will at a low point across the region, those onerous duties were harder to enforce. Lacking any official orders, military officers or any figures of authority were rarely seen in those parts apart from the ubiquitous priests, and nobody had seen a

soldier for months. There were signs of ancient, abandoned settlements everywhere and along both sides of the river, but these broad marshlands had become deserted once more. The only people who now remained were the fishermen who lived in their low hovels and paddled around those marshes in their round, black coracles. No one in Trinobanta of any substance trekked to their most western, riverine boundary anymore if they could help it besides the druids and their workers, and it had become a very neglected and abandoned place until quite recently regardless of its historic significance. The western banks and the lush grasses of Caint were still thronged with worshipers regularly, especially at the four main festivals of the year where they celebrate wildly and lovingly deposit their broken offerings to the Gods still with great enthusiasm. The eastern bankside of holy Aber Tafwys and those once hotly contested Trinobantan borderlands had become utterly devoid of warriors and inhabitants until two years ago, when Lludd had founded his fortress there where the estuary narrowed and in sight of the twin hills which mark those historic palace grounds.

Lludd had coveted Aber Tafwys for over eleven years, since his first impressionable visit there and when he had spotted the ancient and truly huge foundation stones to that old dun, realising their significance immediately, and he had always kept a dream burning bright in his ambitions to renovate Brutus' old palace to its former glory. Lludd had become very wealthy over those intervening years from trade and industry both, but mostly from his successful gold mine near an Essyllyr fortress in Ceredigion. Since its discovery he had been able to achieve many of his ambitions. Searching far and wide in a hilly region high above the afon Ystwyth on Khumry's western coast and following a very old myth, the advice of several uati and his own powerful instincts, an ancient riverbed had been revealed in a speculative dig. There, under that ancient ribbon of gravel he had found long and intermittent stretches of a granular deposit containing softly rounded pebbles of the purest gold. Slaves dug the long rills they called *letau*, and then they carried the water several miles upstream through Cwm Ystwyth in leather buckets to scour

the stepped levels below the turf they had cut away. They chased thick, puddled deposits from under the ancient gravel they had revealed, and in doing so reanimated a small part of that stream's primordial flow for the first time in eons. Lludd and his miners had followed the buried, curving line of that prehistoric brook, finding pockets of gold in the hollows, bends and dips of that long dried up riverbed. The water was sluiced through a series of fleece lined boxes to catch the smaller fragments, and Lludd had turned those glinting flecks and the smooth but irregular, larger lumps of alluvial metal they had recovered into great personal wealth. In recent months, that ancient and lucrative riverbed had dried up again but in a very different way, this time forever. The gold deposits had dwindled to nothing, but not before Lludd had filled several large jute bags with the gleaming pebbles. With that golden capital supporting him, Lludd had taken the initiative when it seemed Trinobanta had none. With no opposition, hundreds of his slaves and indentured labourers had arrived at the very terminus of his brother's lands, and there had descended to the Tafwys en-masse, and it was only a matter of weeks before that stolen land abutting the water had been firmly claimed and established. He did this by clearing a vast open area in that dense forest around its two prominent hills and adjacent to the huge river Tafwys. A colossal bridge with a toll at either end was erected by Lludd's engineers and from some of that vast stock of cut timber, and work on the broad lane leading from the aber and through that newly claimed territory of his had commenced in earnest. That broad drover's road followed an ancient trackway and was trampled into place by many hundreds of slaves, using cartloads of crushed coke and gravel which had thankfully been abundant thereabouts in deep terraces. This main gravel road which Lludd had built at such great personal cost snaked around the emerging dun to follow the contours of the river, eventually forging northwards into the trees and toward his brother's lands. The hills of stacked logs around their busy campsites grew to small mountains as over three miles of trees had been cleared in a broad swath, rising up as it linked to the loop of long-established and curving drover's road which serviced the farmers of that

extended lobe of Casufelawny borderland. Finally, they had a route heading northwest through the detested marshes and up to that peninsula in the boundary, connecting with an ancient loop of border road and arriving eventually at the heart of Caswallawn's grateful kingdom. The next thing Lludd ordered was the raising of a great *gwalc* around the estate; an enormous palisade outer wall made up of whole sharpened tree-trunks and supported by a vast circle of four-foot-tall rubble wall. More huge tracts of the surrounding forest were cleared to feed its monstrous circular growth and to clear all its approaches for the archers. The tall and impressive palisade surrounding Lludd's *Troya Newydd*, and the renovated, stone-built keep emerging from the ancient foundations on the crown of that primary hill within it clearly delineated and proclaimed that new land of his. His dun now firmly secured access and control around the narrowing mouth of that great and sacred river, and although a small token was levied, the new Tafwys Bridge allowed a safe and quick crossing point for the people of both kingdoms. Enormous gates were set into that tall and daunting palisade at all the approaches, and Lludd Llaw Ereint had successfully and bloodlessly established his long-desired fiefdom in southern Prydain. The income from those tolls and his overseas trading had been building steadily over recent months, but sadly, so much of that work had been undone recently and so much had been necessarily dismantled. All that fraught activity and the mass-relocation of his assets and workers had been caused by the impending return of the *yellow dog of Rome*, which included taking down the great Tafwys Bridge, but not before moving tons of equipment over it. All his people had been involved, and everything of value in his new trading post was transported from the Tafwys estuary on a long convoy of ox-drawn carts, which rumbled the twenty or-so miles over the great bridge and to his secret cave network which lay to the southeast, deep inside Cyngetoric's kingdom of Caint. That ancient system of caves and tunnels were where the people of Caint's ancestors with just antler picks had chased the big nodules of flint for their tools and weapons, which were buried deep in the powdery chalk of that ground. Those long-passed but extraordinarily industrious people

had carved out a vast and complex underground warren of shafts and passageways in their endeavours and under a wooded hill known as Bryn Modâ in northern Caint. With a cannily hidden entrance to that warren and the whole compound virtually impossible to find without a guide, *Tylla Bryn Modâ* was an ideal place for hiding away all Lludd's valuables and those of his people. However, despite this massive undertaking and the impact it had taken on his gold reserves, it was nothing that could not be returned and remade when Caesar was eventually persuaded to leave again.

Lludd and Gwerdded both felt languid and relaxed still from the long soak in the mineral rich waters of *tardd faddon* they had enjoyed, as it always seemed to calm the body but enervate the mind. That steaming upswell was no tepid trickle, far from it, as evidence of its gift to that valley was everywhere around it. Arglwydd Sulis' sacred spring was a veritable river of piping hot mineral *soup* bulging up from the inconceivable depths, constant and unending in its rich transcendence from the Underworld to the living one. Its copious overflow was certainly sacred as not only was it hot and the deepest green in colour, where it touched the earth it deposited blood, turning the fringes a terrifying and mystifying red. Sulis' offering slowly vanished back into the earth, and the ground around that vast marsh for many miles around it was more vibrant, exotic and fecund than anywhere else in Prydain. The many visitors to those hazy marshes Lludd and Gwerdded had left behind them would see the conclaves of druids at prayer, and they were often heard to comment on the scattering of low shapes lying in the mists around them looking like the enormous and dark pupae of some monstrous moths. These were deposited by the priests about the tinkling fringes of that huge, steaming lake or along the broad gravel path leading to its centre, and those prone, alien looking figures would lay immobile on the warm and damp reed beds for hours on end. They were uati acolytes, tightly wrapped and trussed up in dew bejewelled calf skins and left unmoving for seemingly endless hours, all attempting to achieve their own physically restricted and sense deprived *awen*. The college within the nearby caer drew acolytes from as far afield

as Mesopotamia, Athens of course, Iberia, Cisalpine Gallia and even Jerusalem, and there was a long and continuous, two-way procession of white robes from those marshes and to the vast black gates of the fortress every day of the year, and where all would pass under the 'Black Raven' cygil mounted above the lintel. The *Braniau Ddu's* infamous druids were without exception dressed in black, deeply hooded *birra* of a harsh material and belted with black fur. Being the most feared sect of druids in southern Prydein, their secret procedures and arcane rites were thought to contain the very oldest and darkest arts practiced by any of the country's priests, but even the *Braniau Ddu's* iniquitous druids had bowed their heads to these two notorious *royal* dewin. Lludd and Gwerdded had attended the huge national congress of druids at their impressive fortress by invitation, representing their own order of the dewin and the infamous 'fire of the druids', but the assembly's interminable lectures and impenetrable discussions had seemed like excruciating torture to these two men of action. Worse, was the unbelievable level of discord displayed by some of the most eminent and holy men and women in Prydein, and nobody it seemed could even agree on the colour of milk. They had suffered these incessant arguments throughout the night and for as long as was polite, but these were busy men, and so they had both left early yesterday morning after the vast assembly had eventually and acrimoniously broken up for the subsequent feasting at sunrise. Having almost fifty miles to cover and no time to waste, as soon as Bel's rosy glimmer had lit the western hills of Khumry and set the grey waters of the Hafren estuary below them aflame, these two royal relations had ridden out of CaerFaddon on stout and superior horses. With only a high escort of two competing squadrons of swifts, these two kings had passed unchallenged through the green vale of Baddon, draped in the twinkling cape of a dew-soaked spring dawn. Unusually, they often travelled without any mounted guard as these two men had no fear of riding anywhere, especially in each other's company. Although dressed in unadorned riding clothes, their quality and the stamp of the fabulous mounts under them screamed their status to all who saw them pass, even if the golden glint

from the torcs at their throats had been missed. Moreover, the similarly uncompromising and chiselled features of both these men were infamous in these parts, and their reputations flew ahead of them faster than the twin formations of acrobatic birds above them. Riding easily down to the suddenly deserted but open southern border and over the afon Peraidd, these two lords arrived unmolested at the wheel rutted drover's lanes which cut through the broad tracts of fodder crops laid out before them. These lanes seemed devoid of people as they rode along them, the adjacent hamlets and small clusters of enclosures being locked up tight, and not even a dog was allowed to bark as they passed. The endless, golden fields around these quietly smoking villages were pleasing to the eye of both riders, and the barley, wheat, and the oats reached up ever hopefully toward the warming sun, promising a fine harvest for these people. Letting the excellent horses pick their own way through the potholes and the ruts of this farmer's lane, this regal uncle and his imposing nephew came to a T-junction ahead and a tall blackthorn hedgerow fronting dense forest behind it. Taking a left turn down this superb double-ditched and metalled road, they took this main road which led its winding but lovely way south into beautiful Durotryga. This excellent road network criss-crossed Prydein and was an astonishing legacy left to the people of this country by High King Dyfnarth Fawr and his amazing son Belenos Hên. Almost twenty generations in descendance from their all-powerful progenitor Brutus, these global elites' ambition and their audacity matched that of their forebear's, and Dyfnarth had commissioned and had funded this nationwide building project more than two centuries ago. That great man had died before seeing his wonderful dream of a completely connected Prydein come to fruition, but his impressive son Belenos had the character and the power to see his father's goal through to the end. Their mind-boggling initiative had transformed Prydein and her internal trading ability miraculously within decades of each regions' completion and connection. Riding knee-to-knee in sunshine and below the vast hillfort of DunMai with its uncountable and colourful *falcon* banners flapping joyously in a blessing of a breeze, they

circumvented the monstrous ditch system around it on this marvellous main road, heading ever southwest. They passed this unbelievably massive town within the biggest palisaded, hilltop fortress in Prydein with appreciative glances as they rode by in silence. Left well alone by all who passed them by, Lludd and Gwerdded rode alongside the colossal, hillside cattle pens of the fierce Durotrygau for miles, and the continual rows of timber fencing around these vast stockades seemed endless. Progressing south through this warming day, they crossed several broad patterns of long pastures, all laid out in neat rows on the land below them and by the original farmers of Prydein those millennia ago. Pushing on and chatting happily they curved their mounts toward the densely forested lands to the west, and as their heavenly escort had long departed they were quite alone. Leaving this vibrant and long-cleared pastureland behind them in a late afternoon, they wheeled with a darkly flaming Bel above to a familiar part of this ancient forest, seeking its sanctuary for the night. Finding a popular spot with a little stream running through it for their horses, they made camp there and built a fire.

The final twenty odd miles quickly passed the following morning, and it was as glorious and as sunny as the previous one. Close to midday, they arrived at the pre-determined meeting place in this unspoiled forest, and both were relieved to see that nothing had happened yet, and that their comrades had waited for them. Lludd and Gwerdded dismounted gracefully and greeted their patient comrades with apologetic smiles. Once the friendly handshakes and formalities were out of the way and they were assured that they had missed nothing, this serious group of elite warriors settled down quietly to wait once more around the remains of a cold fire. It was some hours later and as Bel was blazing his trail across a late but fine afternoon when they heard the approaching cart, and the two latecomers realised with raised eyebrows that they had cut it very finely indeed. Through these trees, this silent and hidden group watched as a twin ox-drawn cart with its lone occupant approached. Its driver was armed with a stock whip and was taking the northern, woodland track into this forest directly toward them and so they all took

cover. The rattling and banging became louder as it trundled by them on its solid, iron-rimmed and heavy timber wheels, and this influential group of men mounted wordlessly in its wake. Following this carter surreptitiously, they led their horses carefully through the trees to one side and on a parallel route but keeping the man just in their view the whole time. They had walked silently for just a few minutes when the man slowed the oxen by a small sylvan clearing to his left, marked out by a Fwlch burnt and fallen oak. Cleaved in two by Arglwydd Fwlch some years ago, this split tree had one half lying among the leaf litter whilst the other deeply charred half still stood, making a fine and memorable landmark. Both halves of this tree had thrown up recent new growth, and the great wounded oak fought for its life as did every living thing in this forest. The cart drew up alongside this lightning-split marker, and the man looked around himself carefully before he hopped to the ground to fetch a shovel from the back of his cart. As silently as possible, these warriors secured their horses before moving carefully to encircle this big man.

Following around ten minutes of his furious digging, every living thing in this part of the forest heard the loud *clunk* when his shovel hit whatever had been buried. This stout but unremarkable man dressed in woodsman's clothing then struggled and pulled, cursed, and sweated to haul a large, iron-strapped wooden chest from the big hole he had just dug. As he dragged the heavy coffer clear, he collapsed to the ground alongside it breathing heavily, and wheezing like a set of leaky old forge bellows.

"Thank you for that Llwyd old chap! Very decent of you to dig it up for us." A disembodied but cultured voice floated from somewhere in these dense trees around him.

This long-absent *Belgic* king snapped his head around and sat up, his hand flying to the sword on his hip as he looked around himself in fear, trying to identify this ghostly speaker whilst still panting raggedly for breath. He paled when he saw a group of big men approach him from every angle through the undergrowth and his jaw became slack, revealing

the stumps of his rotten and blackened teeth which had gained him his now notorious nickname. A regal, hard looking and black mantled noble with a glittering silver hand came to stand a few paces from him, before bowing to him curtly and with a mocking smile on his angular face.

“Did you really think you were going to get away with your little deceit Ddant Ddu? Tut-tut.” Lludd asked him with raised eyebrows, admonishing him with a shake of his head and wagging a living finger at him as if he were instructing a novice squire. “We knew all along you were playing both sides last year and lining your own nest. I said to my colleague here last week when we heard that it was very rash of you returning from Gaul in that fishing boat” He pointed out casually, and Torru *Tarw* beside him nodded in confirmation and with a wicked grin, the sabre-toothed cat skull tattoo on his huge throat supporting him enthusiastically. “I was so disappointed Llwyd when you failed to appear at your special midnight ceremony last year, and when we had spent so much time and effort arranging it all for you!” Lludd chortled, and the look on Llwyd’s face at that moment confirmed that he knew all about the sacrificial ceremony which he had been so lucky to escape. This erstwhile Belgic king of Northern Trinobanta lay sprawled on the ground at Lludd’s feet still breathing heavily, his eyes full of fear now and his mouth hanging, still clearly incapable of speech such was his shock. “You have been shadowed from the moment you set foot back in Prydein Llwyd Ddant Ddu, and now you have so thoughtfully presented us with the missing evidence, your doom is sealed!” Lludd added, looking down his long nose at Llwyd with a hate filled smirk. Llwyd’s eyes grew huge at this knowledge, struck speechless still in his terror, and he looked down at the condemning, mud covered trunk at his feet as if it was a serpent. He also looked as though he was about to throw up into the big hole he had just dug the evidence from, as two of Prydein’s most powerful men stood to look down on him in disgust filled condemnation.

“Your foreknowledge of Caesar’s intentions has too been noted Ddant Ddu, as all in Prydein know you became his lackey in the last war and

committed the worst of treasons!” King Gwerdded spat down at the man. “You are here to collect your loot before your general comes back to lay siege to this land and all of southern Prydein, are you not traitor!” Gwerdded seethed at him, the outrage clear on his granite features and mirroring his uncle’s alongside him, and those familiar and infamous blue eyes blazed this young monarch’s own fury.

“Up you get chap. You’ve still got to load it onto the cart for us!” Lludd advised him more casually, stepping closer and with a grim smile which matched his gimlet eyes at that moment, and King Llwyd turned to grey. As two of Galedon’s terrifying ghost-warriors bent to grab his arms, Llwyd’s huge eyes never left those of his Gorddofic captors, as he needed no introduction to these powerful warlords. These were two of the legendary *red dragons* of Prydein, and his guts twisted with fear at the realisation. Lludd’s flintlike blue eyes were unnerving as he stood imperiously beside his impressive nephew, and this legendary chieftain of Khumry looked even more terrifying close up. Llwyd struggled to gain his feet as he was yanked from the ground, shaking now like one of the leaves on this fallen tree as he was swiftly stripped of his sword and dagger.

The following afternoon and with Bel well past his *anterth*, five riders accompanied this time by an ox-drawn cart travelled northeast from this beautiful forest, heading back up along these picturesque and winding lanes toward Dobunny and Durotryga. This sturdy cart was carrying a heavy, iron strapped chest with Roman markings on it, and it travelled at an easy pace for the horses pulling it, as well as the two bony packhorses which were tied inline to the cart and bringing up the rear. It had taken two long and arduous days of travelling and two short nights of rough sleeping for this vaunted band of warriors to reach the broad estuary of Aber Hafren and to draw within sight of the green hills of Khumry. The beloved motherland now lay across the grey and wide, ever rushing waters of this sacred boundary river before them. To mount the bridge and to cross over the Hafren river at *Pont Cerryg Ddu*, they had to pass

between the two massive monoliths of black granite which gave this bridge its name. This pair of huge black rocks, each the size of two big men had been founded at the head of the annexed Treflan Awst; the tiny, thatched village which had huddled around the bridge approach for as long as anyone can remember, even the Dobunny's bards. The tall and broad timber bridge stretching ahead of them now over the cold, speeding waters of the Hafren terminated at the bulbous tip of distant Penrhyn Sulis. That small and sacred peninsula which juts out into the turbulent water from the opposite bank forms the upper jaw to the mouth of the afon Gwy, and this crossing has stood for centuries. The village and its bridge crossing, and all the trade shipping in and out of this essential estuary were overseen by the nearby secondary stronghold of CaerOdor, and its high battlements were studded with the fluttering colours of its banners this breezy day. *Pont Cerryg Ddu* despite its grand name was not much of a bridge, considering its import and being the only carrier for miles of land traffic from one great nation to another. It was now more a series of latticed timber towers sunk into the mud, constantly fighting the eternal and irresistible flow and which supported the slatted timbers clinging to their tops than a bridge. By necessity, the central arches of this structure were tall enough to allow the ubiquitous and older, but much smaller trading vessels under them to service CaerLoyw upriver; the Dobunny's heartland fortress. Their great capital controlled and tolled the exportation of all their nation's goods, and which poured into its warehouses from a starburst network of lanes and drover's roads, all reaching out into its broad midland territories from this huge estuary. The mouth of the tributary river afon Gwy across the water opens downriver and below the opposite terminal of this ramshackle bridge, and so the trading ships which service CaerGuent's busier and wealthier dockyards across the water have no need to pass under it, and so they were much bigger. This alone over the last three decades has been the key which has unlocked CaerGuent's recent promotion over CaerLoyw upriver along with its surge in trade and the resulting wealth. This ancient bridge was wide and seemed stout enough, however, on closer inspection each timber

support was differently constructed to the next as they had all been replaced at one time or another since time began. This had been done no doubt by woodsmen of greatly differing skills and attitudes over the centuries, as and when the timbers had collapsed into the Hafren from decay. It no longer represented a stout, arched bridge with a series of nice, precise curves, anything but. Rather, it resembled a collection of flat and adjoined sections of timber like a line of tethered rafts, somehow connected to each other and suspended terrifyingly high over that oft raging torrent. The disparate assortment of rickety trellised towers which seemed to miraculously support them all looked frail and unreliable. It was the same sad story for the thick oak planking and the rails, as they were of all different shades, shapes, and condition. Thus, it was a sorry and precarious looking affair, but one which all braved from necessity, or captive force.

This illustrious group ignored the toll collector, and he studiously ignored them, as he needed no introduction to this terrifying looking group of horsemen and did not dare leave his wicker shelter to challenge them for tax. As they passed through Treflan Awst and between the huge black stones to rattle over this massive timber bridge, wagons loaded high with cut Khumric grain approached them with a sound like rolling thunder. These heavy, lumbering carts courageously or recklessly depending on your viewpoint trundled over the bridge from the opposite direction at the same time, more than doubling the weight and the rumbling noise. They were heading east and for the long threshing thatches in the towns and caers of the Dobunny, but their drivers were not really paying attention. As this perilous bridge creaked and swayed alarmingly beneath them, the tension racked up in this elite group as faces and eyes hardened at the hazard. Both parties took great care to pass safely, but the normally bold and garrulous cart drivers eyed this group fearfully as they passed, perhaps wishing now they had paused and allowed these aristocrats to pass before mounting the bridge. Uncommonly, these carters remained silent and bowed their heads in deference as these warrior's accoutrements and the blue tattoos of their monstrous men were warning

enough to these farmers, as were the infamous Khumric lords riding in the vanguard, both being legendary in these parts. Their wisdom was ably confirmed when they spotted the packhorse tied to the cart, trotting along at the rear and forcibly carrying its unfortunate burden across the hair-raising timbers of Pont Cerryg Ddu. As the rolling thunder faded behind them, this royal group cleared these ancient, treacherous timbers and came onto firm bedrock once more with great relief. Once secure on this infamous Khumric peninsula they each bowed to the cairn of stones there topped with an ancient and yellowed skull, and an *arwein* was sent to press a piece of hack silver into one of its crevices. This primitive and simple assembly of pretty hand-picked beach stones paid eternal tribute here to Arglwydd Sulis, who had surely seen them safe across the Hafren this day. They were clearly expected, as there arrayed in bright sunshine which reflected hard shards of golden light from their glimmering armour stood a Gorddofican honour guard of twenty-four mounted gŵyr. These spectacular Khumric knights barred the way but were merely awaiting their returning king and on the most fabulous horses; dark cloaked, armed and menacing in their magnificent splendour. 'Lludd Llaw Ereint! Lludd Llaw Ereint! Lludd Llaw Ereint!' Their yelled salute was proud and loud, and this phalanx of glittering lords held their swords high before turning their mounts with knees alone and to lead their king home in the glory he deserved. Lludd was high king of all Khumry as had been his legendary father, and his homecoming was always rightly celebrated.

Now back in his own beloved country, Lludd felt blessed by the Gods each time they allowed him to return, and he had always suffered a terrible longing for it when he was away for any extended length of time. *Hiraeth* the old people called it, and those poor bereft unfortunates who were exiled or exported as slaves over the centuries to all corners of this earth had all felt this deep and endless longing for their long lost and beloved Khumry, being always remembered and honoured for their sacrifices by those lucky enough to remain. Lludd thought the word apt, as even on sojourn to other territories in the full knowledge that they would soon return; should the Gods allow, the Khumry still suffered this *hiraeth*

acutely. The high king of all Khumry beamed now as his stallion stepped onto home ground once more, as his longing had abruptly vanished and his soul now soared. His spectacular honour guard led this august group into beautiful Essyllyria with pride, and the werrin everywhere came out from their thatches and their turf cŵts to bow deeply before him. Some of the older folk fell to their knees and touched the ground with their foreheads in a truly ancient supplication. Returning home in all his glory was the ruling Gorddofic king of Khumry, and the news of his arrival flitted ahead of him like terrified starlings in a relay. A hundred *reeds* further up Sulis' isthmus, a short lane headed off to their left and vanished over a precipitous edge to the river below. The old bridge over the Gwy here had long decayed to become part of her tribute to Arglwydd Hafren, leaving just a pair of huge but rotten posts to mark its onetime existence. It had never been rebuilt as the land opposite was too low and a new bridge would prove a barrier to the taller ships which now plied the Gwy, so this eye-catching party and its armed and mounted support was forced to travel the two miles further up this peninsula and to the huge and well-maintained bridge at CaerGuent, situated in gloriously panoramic, bounteous and fruitful *Fro Guenta*. The road curved to the left as it made its approach to this famous caer in one of the most beautiful vales in all Khumry, cutting through a broad and long cleared plain of crop fields which was surrounded by dense, hillside forests and flooded with glorious sunlight. As they mounted the apron to this huge and impressive toll bridge, an enormous Gorddofic 'flaming war-hammer' banner was rolled over the high frontal battlements of the caer, to fall below the killing gantry and between the two tall and sharply palisaded gate towers. This black and stunning, star-spangled standard competed gamely in a stiffening wind with its red and white, streaming dragon flag counterparts on the tops of all its towers, informing all in Fro Guenta that their high king had returned. Lludd's honour-guard unfurled their own royal pennant in response as the Essyllwyr guards quickly stood aside and threw the fortified tollgates on this enormous bridge wide open, causing a huge roar of welcome from the crowded battlements.

The two kings and their entourage stayed long enough to pay and receive their respects and to gain some much-needed refreshment in this enormous bastion, but within the hour were back in their saddles. Once this huge, bustling market town and its dragon-bannered fortress had been circumvented, they headed south to pick up the main drover's road again, curving east initially to Porth Esgewin. Passing through this little port and its attendant village on the shoreline of the aber of the mighty Hafren without pause, they pushed on, heading inland through the vibrant trees ahead of them in this warm afternoon sunshine. Taking the main road west through this dense forest, they passed through Treflan Solara made up of several spreads of big houses in a vast clearing, all glowing with new thatching in their large, freshly limewashed and expensive looking enclosures. Their numerous stock animals were fat and happy in their pens, and lush orchards bejewelled their gardens with delicious colours in this dappled sunshine, soothing the eyes and watering the mouths of these passing travellers. Chatting amiably between themselves and swaying easily in their comfortable saddles, these northern warriors were taking all this pastoral splendour in as the grunting form of the disgraced Belgic king bounced along behind them. They led him through this wealthy-looking thatched settlement of Solara, thrown belly down over the pack horse at the rear, and a few of this town's well-dressed inhabitants came out to stare silently at this royal caravan and their forlorn captive with grim expressions. Llwyd's hands and feet had been bound tightly, and he had been painfully gagged with a filthy rag stuffed between his black teeth, which had then been roughly fastened with a rope tied around his now bouncing head. Llwyd had fallen off his horse twice, but each time had sustained such a kicking, all his strength was needed to stop himself falling off again. When he had thrown up in his gag, it had been removed slowly, cruelly and with much sport, and he had been left thrashing around wide eyed until he had almost drowned in his own vomit. Surviving this traumatic experience, but only just and with much painful coughing and spluttering once the gag was eventually removed, he was now in a desperate state. Now his ribs felt as though

they were cracked and broken, and Llwyd gasped from the pain with each jarring step of this underfed horse under him. This reduced and condemned king had been gagged again equally painfully, but now with a life-saving gap left for him to breathe and to puke through. He was in breath catching agony now regardless, and the recently self-exiled King Llwyd ap Cywyllog of Northern Trinobanta found himself in his own dumb world of excruciating pain and immense suffering, and with no possibility of escape. However, this wicked man would discover over the following days, that given the opportunity he would gladly remove his own testicles with two blunt sticks to be back bouncing painfully along on this bony packhorse.

Olwydd was laughing again, and so were his compatriots and as his wicked sense of humour was revealed to these amused warriors once more. As they relaxed in their saddles on this wide drover's lane hundreds of miles from home, conversation got around to punishments for some reason, and Nêr Fuanladd the ghost-warrior called to his also recently promoted colleague, the now noble and newly made up *Gŵyr* Olwydd Hîr across the bumping and moaning form of their captive.

"I suppose shit-breath must have thought he'd got away with it when he missed his date with the arch-druids last year." The ghost-warrior Fuanladd opined with a grin.

"Yes, but I think he will rue the day that he did Fuanladd." Olwydd answered him dourly, glancing back to their prisoner. "I'd much rather a crack on the head and the swift cut of a flint dagger across my throat than what awaits him now!" He growled, looking around at his comrades.

"Have you ever heard of the '*Gawres y Blingo*' *Gŵyr* Olwydd?" Fuanladd asked him then, a cruel twist to his smirk.

"Blingo Ladies? I'm not sure that I have Fuanladd!" Olwydd lied brazenly and in his thick northern dialect but with a wry grin on his hard face. Torru *Tarw* burst out laughing beside him, the blue cat skull at this man's powerful throat leaping and silently screaming in supportive amusement.

Lludd and Gwerdded exchanged knowing looks at the head of this group, and they shared similar terse grins as the *ailadrodd*; the 'déjà-vu' was not lost on either man, but they remained silent in their saddles and with their eyes glittering.

"Oh, I remember! They're not *really* ladies are they Torru!" Olwydd chortled, turning to his huge compatriot, and although this new Galedonian lord spoke well enough, the slight vowel shifts in his words revealed a similarly high-altitude dialect to his northern colleagues. As Olwydd continued, his speech was as melodic and attractive to Lludd's ears as the lilting, Khumric dialect of his own people, but it was countered this beautiful morning by the dark and cruel words the big man was speaking.

"They are the worker women of the priesthood Torru my combrogi, and occasionally they are called upon to perform their other dread and terrible skills. They will *skin him alive* my brothers and with their fingers!" Olwydd growled, turning back to the others and with an obvious relish, revealing too the infamously cruel side to his character. Those who knew him well would have corrected that assessment perhaps to 'merciless when required' not 'cruel out of hand'. As to an honourable warrior there was a distinct and vital difference, one which many considered the proper virtue of *mercy* being the very quality which elevates the great from the powerful. "What do you think of that dogshit-breath?" Olwydd called out in his brogue, but the response was merely a wet and pulsing gurgle as their captive bounced up and down behind them. Olwydd laughed again like a growling wardog. "He will be given milk of the poppy to prevent his premature expiry from shock, and they will then open a long slit in the skin the whole length of his back." He told them all this quite bleakly, warming to his task once more and as the procedure came back to mind. "Regardless of the potion though, they feel every cut, twinge, and tear as two or more of those strong women push their hands into this opening under the skin, up and around the neck and shoulders without pause. They ferret with their sharp little fingers, and they actually lift the skin

from the body, limb by limb, and they are often up to their elbows inside the victim's own body, pushing here, separating there, ever careful not to tear a blood pipe." He had to pause here at the groans and mock horror of his listeners, but with another expressionless glance at their trailing captive, Olwydd pressed on remorselessly. "You know human skin does not come away handily like that of a piglet as it must be torn away, and it takes strength to rip it from the bones. But having had plenty of practice and with much determined effort, these powerful women manage to tear the skin off their living victim whole and in one piece, ending up painted with their victim's gore from head to toe!" He told them all this theatrically from his saddle, and his three comrades whistled, also looking back at Llwyd, who just moaned in a staccato terror at the rear in response, bouncing along in his agony. "I'm led to believe, that the excruciating moments when the skin is ripped from the final, clinging extremities are horrendous! You know, the eyes and nose, the fingers and toes. The arsehole and the cock and bollocks are especially memorable I'm told!" Olwydd said easily and to more guffaws of laughter from his men.

At the head of this easy company of men, Lludd could not help but get caught up in their savage amusement, prompting Gwerdded to do the same and both men laughed dourly in their saddles, shaking their heads at these northerners' dark humour and the harsh truth of this deadly situation. As Bel described a most graceful arc across the bluest of skies, Lludd's honour guard led them to CaerAu in fine spirits, sheltered as it was by the curving embrace of a fine bend in the afon Elái and to where the implacable druids of this kingdom and one man's doom awaited them all. Turning south into the familiar and stunningly beautiful Fro Llaneirwg, they rode past a vassal fort of the Essyllwyr, and it was one of three of their bastions in this sun-blessed vale. Lludd was clearly pleased when his banner was raised high between the palisaded gate towers and above their red dragon flags, and it fluttered open in salutation and a colourful welcome home to their ruling king in a fine breeze. The captain of their vanguard brandished their Gorddofican banner once more in response,

and the roar from the battlements sent the birds flapping away in startled flocks. The werrin were flocking from their cŵts and their thatches once more to catch a glimpse of their king as he passed them in his black and silver glory. The old folk fell to their knees, the werrin waved and their children threw blooms onto this spectacular group as they passed them in their splendour, and with their proud high king and his spectacular mounted guard leading the way, it was a sight none of these werrin would ever forget.

Following this celebrated gŵyrd of CaerAu's honour guard as the sun rose high above them all, this impressive group of northern warriors passed by a beautiful lake, and all were hushed into a silent awe by its stunning beauty. Riding across a stout bridge built over one of the irrigation ditches running from it, none could draw their wide eyes from its magical, glittering surface for many moments.

"Anyway, what happens then Gŵyr Olwydd? What will these blingo women do with our traitor?" Torru asked his leader needlessly, knowing well the answer, but he broke the spell of the sacred lake and returned to the grim subject with a truly savage grin on his big face, matching the ferocious blue one at his muscular throat. This Galedonian ghost-warrior; Torru ap Gwrthun was an enormous, bull like man from the Cornafau Ddu tribe in the high north. With great bunches of muscles bulging out from everywhere and putting an enormous strain on the laces of his clothing, this ferocious looking giant made the horse under him look tiny. From his past exploits, this monstrous killer had earned the play-on-words nickname of *Torru Tarw*; the Bull Slayer.

"Well my brother you won't believe it, but a young acolyte will then *don* Llwyd's wet and flaccid skin, aided by those same blood smeared Blingo women as they push and squeeze the living skin into place. Then that acolyte will dance around in front of their flayed victim, dressed in their own baggy skin!" Olwydd told this great bull of a man riding alongside him, laughing again uproariously, and his three combrogi joined him with a raucous chorus of their own. Then onwards they cantered in their

amusement, dragging their bouncing prisoner down this rutted but accommodatingly broad drover's road, heading ever south and west toward Lludd's great caer; the high-towered and palisaded monstrosity rising majestically in the hazy distance ahead. Bringing up the rear, Llwyd retched again, ejecting a thin stream of watery vomit from the corner of his mouth to the passing dirt, and a foul stench came from the man now, as he had obviously soiled his bracs in fear. Fuanladd waved the stink from under his nose.

"*Phew!* Cnuch me! For the first time, both ends of this creature smell the same!" The ghost-warrior cursed, and his companions thought this particularly hilarious, rocking with more laughter on their saddles. "If he shits himself at the words, what's he going to do when he feels those strong fingers forcing their way into his body?" He added, tears running down his face now.

"It's when the poppy milk slowly wears off, that's when the real fun starts!" Olwydd countered brutally and chuckling darkly as his cold eyes lingered on the bouncing prisoner behind them. "The agony I'm told is worse than being slowly roasted alive! You all know how traitors are treated here in Prydein, so the werrin then come in their droves to fling all manner of foul things at the bloody, man shaped meat which remains, still clinging unwillingly to life. Much of what is thrown is doused in piss and salted vinegar." He added harshly, and they all laughed again, but it was a dark laughter now as the ruined image of their captive had been clearly and sharply conjured in their minds by Olwydd, and even to these men it was a sobering one. "The priest Rîon *Troellog* told me that King Caswallawn of Lloegr has challenged him, to see how long he can keep him alive after the blingo women have finished with him!" He chortled, wiping a tear from his eye. "He has gold on the wager apparently, but four days is the longest I have ever head anyone lasting, but you would not believe the unspeakable things that 'mind whirling' druid will do to win that king's gold. Nor would you believe the filth he will force-feed this

treacherous creature, just to keep him alive a little longer!" He added ominously.

"Corryn *Ddant-aur* lasted three days and nights last year, well beyond my best guess, and I lost a prized dagger in that wager!" Torru *Tarw* spat to the dust, rueing his lost bet. "I shan't even bother a wager on this traitor as it is beneath me!" The huge ghost-warrior declared, turning up his nose and causing more laughter.

"Corryn the spider had almost twenty years on old Llwyd Torru, so I don't think our rotten-toothed companion will even last the first day!" Olwydd sneered, looking away finally from the bouncing form of Llwyd. Easing back into his saddle, he thoughtlessly followed these two Khumric lords and their spectacular escort ahead into shadow, and as they approached the enormous and daunting gatehouse of *CaerAu*, the hard smile finally faded.

"A philosophical question for you then dogshit breath!" Fuanladd called out, and in an affable tone as they approached the broad ramp and the massively palisaded gate towers of *CaerAu* which now loomed high above them. "Given the choice, would you prefer the hard and black flaying tongs of the mad druid or the long and probing fingers of his blingo women, all of which await your stinking presence here with open arms?" He asked their captive casually and as they clattered up the flagstones toward those towering black gates, but there was no response from the rear. As a horse gate in the huge black bastion ahead of them opened, it caused angular shafts of shadow to leap across these sloping and brightly sunlit slabs, and as this lean horse plodded up them, the condemned Llwyd *Ddant Ddu* passed out with a groan but to a chorus of loud and cruel laughter.



Chapter Two.

It was the twelfth day of Derwen, the seventh lunar month of the year, and this year's spring was waning quickly. The sacred festival of Beltain had arrived in Môn, blessing the mother of Khumry and the honoured matriarch of all Prydein with its promise as it had across the world. The ritual washing of the stock animals had been carried out at sunrise, and this was done at a wide and shallow crossing at the outflow of the remarkable afon Nodwydd. Abernodwydd lies less than half a mile northwest across the great maes and the hillfort of CaerBraint, the sinister black fortress which overlooks the broad and sandy beach known as *Traeth Coch*. The needle-like river Nodwydd seeks out and divides that shore on reaching the ocean there, and it is where the beasts are sanctified each year at this auspicious time. This annual and ritual washing of the animals had turned the swift waters of the Nodwydd brown all across that curving, southern end of the broad and sandy crescent known as the 'Red Beach'. It was where the estuary of the Nodwydd cut across those ruddy sands, and the spiritual cleansing of these people's priceless animals in its steady flow had thrown a dirty, fan-like swathe of mud into the ocean from that sandy aber, showing far out into the iron-grey sea and beyond. All along the green hillsides overlooking the dark sands of that estuary, this spring's new life of lambs and calves are held in their pens and under constant guard to keep the wolves at bay. There was always an archer among these stock guards who were billeted alongside those sloping stockades, as new animals were as vital to this community as the coming harvest. Whilst cattle gave birth all year round, they were compelled to calve mainly at this auspicious time by their canny stockmen, but it was a joy for all to see the elevated pastures above Traeth Coch filled with this new life. The frolicking lambs in their new and fluffy white or black coats were eye catching, and the stiff legged heifers

charging aimlessly about those grassy slopes raised many smiles in the little fishing village below. The werrin would pause often throughout their working day to watch these delightful infants athletically find their own feet and discover this hard, new life for themselves.

CaerBraint itself is situated at the root of the Llanddona peninsula in this south-eastern corner of Môn, and nearby smoulder the villages of Treflan Llanddona and Treflan Pentraeth, both being in the lands of the fierce Decawangly. Busy little Treflan Pentraeth has always lain under the oppressive shadow of that fearsome and inviolate, military caer of the dewin which has towered menacingly over that small village for unknown ages. CaerBraint, or *plâs y dewin* as it is also known is a huge hilltop fortress, and it is the secretive, mysterious and spell bound caer where Lludd Llaw Ereint and his esteemed nephew Gwerdded ap Nynniaw trained. It is where all students of this most demanding and archaic, priestly order are schooled in their dark arts, and it dominates that ancient and rugged landscape.

The treasured cattle had been first into the river this morning, and dozens of Decawangly stockmen along with their wives and children had scrubbed a year's worth of muck off their animal's long horns and their shaggy, russet brown coats with stiff brushes as they were prone to matting. Each had a fine-toothed bone *torogen* comb tucked in a belt or a pocket to lift off any bloodsucking cattle ticks they discovered among the thick hides of these beasts, before then squishing these bulbous purple parasites with a thumbnail into the brown flowing water of the slender river Nodwydd. After their wash and inspection, these treasured long horned cattle were then driven back up and across the hillside pastures. They were herded toward a pair of angled fences which had been erected on this broad hillside overlooking the red beach forming an enormous and gaping mouth. This wicker funnel narrowed as it swept uphill, and these soaking wet and steaming cattle were driven upwards and onwards into it by dogs and more whistling, staff wielding stockmen. They forced this mixed herd between these contracting fences and toward the two long

fires which had been set to both sides beyond. The cattle at the front were pressed forward by the galvanised herd behind them and roused by the heat from these fires to either side, they lumbered forward between these leaping and crackling flames toward the daylight ahead, lowing and mooing in protest at the ordeal the whole way. Some young men and women, mostly the nobles' and the farmer's children, usually encouraged by strong ale or mead would run and jump between these flames and alongside or between these stampeding cattle. Each carried a branch of Rowan with which they brushed the steaming backs of these beasts as they tore along among them, as their bright, blood-red berries gave them protection from any lurking and malevolent spirits. These youngsters whooped and whistled, laughing wildly as they sprinted alongside these lumbering beats. Many made a bet or fulfilled a dare, or they just did it for the *bri* and the blood rushing thrill of it, and it was hugely popular. Occasionally there were injuries and even deaths among these brave participants, and this only made the activity more attractive to young, action seeking men and women. A number of senior druids had lined both sides of this long fence, casting their blessings and making the ancient incantations to ward off any malevolent and lurking spirits among this mass of moving, jostling animals as they passed them in this wicker channel. They did this by sprinkling the broad, steaming backs of these cattle with their sacred Beltain ashes, scattered hawthorn blossoms and sacred water drawn from a holy spring, and these druids dutifully sanctified the Decawangly's cherished cattle for the coming year. The two different herds of sheep were next into the cold, muddy waters of the Nodwydd, and the finer wool bearing *Dafad y Cnu* were followed by the greasy fleeced *Dafad y Lana*. Both underwent the same scrubbing and quick inspection process before they were herded back together and urged to follow the deep cattle tracks in the red and sandy mud, back up the bank and to the plain beyond. These soaking wet sheep would soon be shorn or plucked of their wool, and the washing helped in this regard as the wool preparation was made that much easier. These valuable animals were then too forced between the timber post and wicker panel fences to

run the blazing, sanctifying gauntlet of Bel's fire, or Beltân as the old folks of Môn still called it. All this dedication, prayer and effort was to the blinding and heavenly glory of Bel, who's warmth and love caressed these people's vital crops into imperative growth each summer so that they can feed themselves and their animals. *His* glorious furnace along with *His* earthly spirits of flame which keep the wild beasts at bay are divine, but who's deadly and searing heat can also destroy everything. Above all Prydein's Gods, Bel must be appeased at all costs at this propitious time of year. It is inevitable too, that on this day all Brythons' thoughts return to the cataclysm of some years previously when the black doom had fallen on Prydein. It was Beltain when they had lost their beloved high king and their high queen; the Godlike Beli Mawr and the revered Dôn, and it was holy Beltain when those eternally treasured monarchs had been so cruelly taken from this world, seven years ago. High King Beli Mawr was named for his revered ancestor Belenos Hên who defeated his colossal brother Bran to take the high kingship of Prydein almost six long centuries before. This glittering, unsurpassed lineage stretches back further still to Belinus Fawr and through the roiling mists of time to the all-powerful Beleil, and back again it goes. It reaches all the way back to Phoenicia and the very beginning of time itself and to his primordial progenitor the sun God 'Bel' himself; *He* who drives across the sky in his war-carbad each day with his fabulous Goddess and Queen Sulis at his side. Beli Mawr, along with all his noble descendants have these glorious, previous monarchs' blood coursing through their veins, and so it was no surprise that the five sons of Beli had come to hold such unimpeachable power across this country in those same, seven sad years.

Now spiritually protected for another thirteen months, the people of Llanddona's beloved livestock could be driven up the lush hills of Môn, to live free and to fatten up on the fecund summer pastures and to drink their fill from the fresh mountain streams there. From their rough and boisterous bumping and their excitable bursts of stiff-legged running along with their loud and competitive *mooing*, this annual relocation was clearly a joyful experience for their beloved cattle. It must have been a

blessed relief to them all after being kept in their lowland pens and fed an ever-dwindling stock of increasingly inedible hay during the long and cold winter months. This joy was shared by all, as holy Beltain marked the beginning of the pastoral summer season for all Brythons when the hope was bright in them that the rich brown soil of their land would once again give up its lifegiving bounty. This was especially so toward the height of summer when the land was warm and food was plentiful. At night, the wise eyes of all Prydeinig farmers were drawn to the northern heavens at this time each year, as once *their* group of seven sacred stars in that illuminating constellation vanished they knew it was time to plant their crop seeds. Beltain is a sacred and a beloved time when the health of the werrin improve steadily throughout these warm and Gods'-blessed months, girding them for the next hard winter to come. All feel a lift in their spirits at this time of year, and hundreds of little fireboats are made by all Prydein's mothers and their children and then set to float down the countless rivers and streams of this blessed country. The Gods look down on these living, flickering serpents of water that snake across these lands below them with joy, and their gaze also falls on these myriad votive flames created to their honour. They gaze down onto the riverbanks which contain them, and which then transport them unerringly ocean bound in their names. Alongside these thousands of tiny and slowly drifting and blinking flames, the riverbanks are thronged by the werrin on this day and who's countless and uplifted eyes glitter with the same devotion. All hope that their Gods' gazes may brush across them also and perhaps offer them their blessings as they pray.

Inside and out of all the great duns and caers of Prydein and in every treflan and tref of this great country of kingdoms there are also truly ancient, private rituals held by the druids and druidens of each community. Publicly, they lead the children of their communities in the practices and the chants of Beltain rhymes and holy songs, and these englyns and poems are sung with a rare intensity and a deep meaning here; here in this most enigmatic corner of Ynys Môn. Special bonfires are kindled from sacred hazels by the druids of each community, each making

great ceremony of the procedure, and their wondrous, sparkling, and colourful flames produce a fragrant smoke deemed to have protective and restorative powers. All the werrin and their children would dance through these thick coils of aromatic smoke, wiping it across their faces and chanting the old and utterly familiar recitals. Once these essential and vitally important ceremonies are complete and their cleansed and sanctified stock animals are resecured in their holding pens, the werrins' attention turns to themselves and to their homes. Everything needed to be carried outside each thatched abode across all these kingdoms before the cleaning of the interiors and the thatching begins, usually by the whole family and with much cooperation within and between communities. Last year's fire is built up within each home at this auspicious time, and this with fresh wood and various green twigs, these exclusively grown and issued by the druids so that these new cleansing fires of Beltain produce prodigious amounts of insecticidal smoke. A huge and wetted blanket of stitched hides is then lifted over the roof of each house on four long poles by the men, and this is used to cover and to *tamp* large areas of the roof, to trap the smoke within the thatching and thereby kill all its insect inhabitants. All the dirty straw from within would be carefully burned on the old fire. This fire would then be formally put out and the hearth cleaned and blessed with holy water before a new fire was lit on the clean stones from this season's druidic offerings, and before this seasons new floor rushes could be brought into each spotless homestead. The Beltain fair and the festival of Treflan Pentraeth can finally begin in earnest once all these necessities have been completed, and the mountain of food and the countless pots of barley beer which have been set aside can be addressed by these hungry and eternally thirsty celebrants.

The rough, tussocked plain surrounding Treflan Pentraeth is thronged with over a thousand of these happy and excited people tonight, all enjoying the festivities. They had become entirely caught up in the thrilling and momentous happenings here in the north, and the fearful rumours concerning Prydein's southern horizon certainly added spice to the gossip.

These were fortified by the deeper, far more primitive urges of Beltain, and the Gods smiled down on this sea of Khumric Brythons in a happy period of seasonal celebration and communal friendship. Bel had driven west across the sky in his blazing chariot with his noble Queen at his side, and he now flamed vividly in an ostentatious farewell of elemental splendour. Bel sank behind the western peaks of *Yr Wyddfa*, his billowing cloak turning Arglwydd Eryri and her foothills red in passing. The soaring and utterly black fortress of CaerBaint nearby was swept with shadow, and it was locked up tight under this auspicious sunset. Within, the *Order of the Dewin* hold their own utterly secret rituals on this remarkable night, and a portentous atmosphere descended on a pensive Llanddona peninsula as this sacred day's rites and practices proceeded. The rural communities inhabiting this corner of Môn come together around the village and the footing of this darkly aloof fortress each year and at this time to hold their own crucial celebrations. The Decawangly Royal family have always attended this particular Beltain festival along with all their noble relations, as this region known as Fro Llanddona and the villages and trefs of this region are more sacred and closer to their Gods than anywhere else in their lands, especially the darkly overshadowed and spirit familiar Treflan Pentraeth.

King Bryn ap Terfel and his royal court had left his capital CaerLeb this morning, built high above the *maerdref* of Brynsiencin and in his ancient territory known as Royal Llanidan. This large and bearded king and his host of excited people had ridden and walked east across this sacred island to come here as they did each year to this highly spirit-charged region and Treflan Pentraeth in particular. Pentraeth has a broad and accessible festival maes and with its nearby beach of Traeth Coch being wide and accommodating, it has been the Decawangly place of 'royal' Beltain celebration for unknown generations. The open-air concert in and around the maes adjoining the tref was usually the centre point of the Decawangly festival, and this night's choral performances had lasted six short but glorious hours. Cantorion from across Gogledd Khumry had assembled for their performances inside a tall ring of burning torches on

the maes, no doubt drawn by the royal warrant and the generous assured income. The surrounding area had been filled with long and tall pavilions and large tents selling all manner of food and drink, and many hugely popular game stalls had been set up on the rough turf around the main grounds. The well-trodden grass of this great circular field was packed like a beehive this night as royals, nobles and the werrin alike crowded around the open, central performance area, revelling in the soaring and heart-wrenching emotions these professional singers could wring from them. A comical drama always followed the concert on the big timber stage at the heart of this maes, this lit with roaring torches. The audience roared with laughter at the antics of these players as they acted out a well-known royal scandal of old, bending to collect their tokens of reward from the illuminated grass with their painted smiles of gratitude. As sacred midnight drew near, the Decawangly priesthood, their bards and uati emerged once more from their own pavilions and in a scurrying onslaught of white linen robes. Behind this religious advance, the Beltain bower was brought forward by their stewards and carried into the centre of the now empty performance area for *y defod mawr*. This bower was a large and oval coracle of wicker made luxurious inside with linen, silks and fur for 'the great rite' which was about to commence. It had been inundated with the white and yellow blooms of spring, propped up as it was now on its side to reveal an inner cocoon of sumptuous comfort. Elk skin drums began pounding a heartbeat rhythm from somewhere nearby as the stewards placed this sacred bower on its low stand at the heart of this maes, and a sudden reedy blare of druids' stag horns announced the arrival of the revered virgin huntress. This lithe young maiden had been selected from the cherished and chaste daughters of the Decawangly nobles to represent one half of tonight's ultimate and obligatory ritual of continued fertility and the impending 'grand rite' of Beltain; *y defod mawr*. This chosen girl was a gifted archer and had proved herself to be the best huntress among her peers, and she was now painted from head to toe in the blue, mystical and ancient workings of the uati. Stunningly swathed in a diaphanous wrap of an almost transparent cloth in a light and ghostly

weave, this most feminine creation of natural beauty also wore the glittering metal mask of the Goddess Rhiannon; *the Huntress*. Her lustrous, chestnut curls fell loosely about this wondrous, sculpted mask of pure silver, and her big, blue and beautiful eyes stared softly from a pair of almond eyeholes exquisitely formed in this chased and embossed silver countenance. As this mortal Rhiannon entered this circle of flickering light a quiet hum of stunned appreciation issued from the surrounding crowd, and all eyes were glued to this beautiful, Gods-sworn figure as she moved barefoot with a lithe, catlike deftness across the grass. A circlet of hawthorn blossom adorned her lovely head, and as she walked into this circle of tall and roaring torches in her slow and stylish step, every eye followed her graceful progress. Rhiannon incarnate trod counter-sunwise three times around her bower, inspecting it carefully as she circled it with the elegance of a dancer. This embodiment of the virgin huntress was simply exquisite to behold, and she seemed to float serenely across this close-cropped turf, stepping lightly and graciously up to the front of her ceremonial bower to take her place within it. There she rested in stunning and feminine repose as the living light of the surrounding torches bounced off the mirrored facets of her silver mask, and she was simply breathtaking. Her demeanour however was not one of calm and patient submission, as her attitude was at once one of proud ownership of this bower, and this Goddess personified now exuded a fierce and challenging independence. This age-old and achingly familiar scene of 'the great rite' was being played out across the world of the combrogi at this time and it took all forms, from the crude, leaf made masks and homespun clothing of the far flung werrin to the dazzling opulence of a royal court here presented. Whether in a cave or a bower or a basement grain pit, the masked virgin huntress Rhiannon would repose on a fine bed of soft bracken or whatever was available and be surrounded by her spring flowers. There, she would await the fated and irresistible arrival of her opponent Bel, surrounded by her priests, her family, and her peers this glorious night of celebration and essential procreation.

Bel was represented at this sacred ceremony each year by the warrior who had killed first and had killed cleanly in the early Beltain royal hunt this morning. Decawangly's champion hunter took the form of a tall and muscular figure of a seasoned soldier tonight. It was this huge warrior who had neatly killed a fine stag this morning, with a superbly thrown spear and in the presence of the king himself. This warrior now wore a cape of fine black wool around his massive shoulders, and this had been woven with wondrous swirling and circular designs in pure golden thread to honour the great sun God now departed. This successful hunter's powerful body had also been daubed in the colourful designs and the interlocking patterns of truly ancient Phoenician legitimacy, in gold paint rather than the ubiquitous woad-blue of his likely partner this night, and these included the swastikas, solar crosses and wheeled crosses that have endured in these parts for millennia. This broad and powerful man wore only an abbreviated kirt of animal pelt around his narrow waist, and Bel personified also wore a mask, and this Khumric Bel wore a heavy gold sun mask for this fraught ritual tonight. This glittering wonder was supported and attested by two heavy gold arm rings, each big warrior's bicep displaying a thick hammered disc of the same pure and buttery yellow metal with a solar cross deeply embossed into its shining outer surface. The proud head and the straw blond, braided hair above his stunning gold façade were adorned with a glossy crown of startling green holly, this to remind all here present that the *Holly King* so beloved by the druids must also be represented and worshipped at Beltain. The Holly King must too be appeased and respected at this sacred festival, as although he is far older than druidism itself, he is honoured still as he must complete the ancient circle of life and growth so that all living things can grow and thrive. Here and now, and at the death of spring the Holly King redeems his spiky crown, which he wears with infinite honour for the rest of the year until challenged each Yule by the old and bearded Oak King himself, and in which fateful conflagration the Holly King loses his crown once more. This immutable and revolving truth has been known for

uncountable centuries from the birth of the first man, and it will be known until the death of the last woman and to the end of all days.

Another brash and reedy series of notes were heard then from several druids' stag horns, and the crowds parted on one side of this ring to make a living avenue for this tall and muscular Bel, who, infinitely carefully entered this bright circle from the east to stop just within its flickering limits. Muscular and golden Bel stood there dramatically with his bulging legs apart and fists on his hips as he perused this sacred circle. As the heartbeat of the drums increased dramatically along with all the watching werrins', this golden masked warrior dropped into a hunter's crouch, and in the exaggerated, slow, and precise movements of familiar but ritualistic tracking he began to stalk this ground. Bel followed his instincts and he approached the stunning floral beauty of this bower and its enticing contents at the very centre of this shadow-dancing clearing. His oiled and gold anointed muscles rippled and shone in this wavering torchlight as he adopted a wide stance on thick and muscular legs, and weaving from side-to-side in a hypnotic, compelling motion, this entranced warrior moved infinitely closer to the virgin huntress' bower. He tracked around this wondrous creation three times sunwise in his halting and crouched, animalistic manner, weaving from side to side with his gold adorned muscles rippling under the light of these roaring torches. Snuffling and sniffing the air as he stalked around it, Bel the hunter came to face this beautiful bower's stunning occupant. Rhiannon sat up in alarm, and their eyes locked as Bel moved forward infinitely slowly and deliberately toward her, winding his mesmerising way around to the open front of this luxurious coracle and to face the startled silver Goddess reposed within. Noble gold and silver met then among the blooms, but not a word was exchanged between these two Godly opponents as this sacred procedure was older than language itself. As Bel attempted to enter the bower and mount Rhiannon, the age-old struggle for survival began once more. This was no fawning welcome, it was anything but, and brave Rhiannon joined hands with Bel, intertwining her fingers with his to fiercely enact this struggle for life itself. As Rhiannon stood to defend her bower at its

entrance, they fought for dominance now and in this truly ancient and highly stylised form which flowed backwards and forwards to the heartbeat tempo of the elk skin drums. Carried by the cadence of these wild drums and by the earliest of all rhythms; they danced *the great rite*. This annual and deeply sacred pageant is loved by all especially here, moving many of these onlookers to tears as those two Godly representatives struggled for supremacy on their behalf. As the sun subdues the stars each dawn, Bel must subdue the dazzling Rhiannon before she becomes compliant and amenable. This legendary, golden hunter's unchallenged strength begins to tell as the silver Goddess' struggling abates, and he lays her back down now gently, back among the bloom scented silks and the soft, welcoming furs. The crowds were packed cheek-by-jowl into the spaces around this delightful bower now, with those behind the front ranks shuffling forwards and craning their necks to see the *cysylltiol*, the sacred and longed-for 'connecting' and the legitimate conclusion to this spectacular event.

As the last glowing smears of burnt red slashed carelessly across the bruising sky above illuminated the western horizon behind these entwined and cocooned Gods come to earth, they sharply silhouetted their Beltain bower into one of blood and shadow. Wide eyed and mesmerised by this ceremony even though it was played out each year across their lands, 'y *defod mawr*' remained a thrilling and a vital part of not only these werrins' calendar, but of their deeply held religion and beliefs. In fact, their complete cultural heritage and their entire sense of identity were secured for eternity within these arcane rites for their offspring, especially this great one, and in Beltain's fiery hot crucible rested the future hopes of many nations. A huge and collective sigh came from these spellbound people now, following quickly and complimenting the singular and more abrupt one which ushered from the virgin huntress as she willingly gave up the first part of her title. Should this shared, wonderful and holy act of procreation between these ever anonymous, ever disparate individuals produce an offspring, this revered child would be Gods' sworn from the moment of its bloody arrival into this world. From its first tenuous breath,

all would know this child to be the wise, reincarnate soul of one of their most famed and honoured druid ancestors thus returned, and that holy child, along with its then Gods-sworn mother would be protected and cared for by the priesthood for all their lives.

The great God Bel: progenitor of Belenos Hên and all his legendary lineage of Brythonic offspring was thus honoured and adored, and although now passing unseen across the Underworld, the werrin were sure that *He* beamed with a beneficent and protective smile for them all wherever he was. All would be reassembled and ready the following morning but facing east to welcome and to glorify Bel on his most welcomed return to the living world, whereupon he heralds the end of the dark seasons of the year with a burst of his fundamental and golden splendour. Just before *His* new dawn, even the stars will pale in early greeting as he pauses below the eastern horizon before rising again in all his everlasting, elemental glory. All Brythons will cheer loudly in welcome to Bel on this auspicious morning, and the Brythons will celebrate this celestial rebirth of life itself until the very end of days. As these days of Bel and his journeys across the heavens grow steadily longer, the countryside below his steady, westerly sweeps settles into a slower pace, and in the rising warmth of *His* burgeoning summer the people of Prydein are kept busy. The crops are finally established, growing quickly and spearing their way skywards toward their blazing and everlasting God. These ripening fields of fodder grass and the long rows of cereal, seed and fibre flax, along with the indispensable rows of jute growing across Prydein are without exception populated with each community's younger children and by their dogs. It is always the children who carry out the endless chore of inspection firstly, followed by the plucking of any parasitical insects from the leaves and stalks of their vital crops, leaving just the beneficial ones identified through constant education. Then the unruly weeds must be tugged from in between these growing plants whilst their roaming dogs keep the rodents busy, and this imperative industry is countrywide at this time of year. The stockmen's beasts are already up on the high ground secure in their pens, and there they will stay until

summer's end, joyfully fattening and filling out their hips on the lush grasses and drinking pure mountain water. The teenage boys of every community will all be armed with razor-sharp sickles and set to tackling the flourishing stands of couch grass which sprout everywhere now. The cropping of this fast-growing nuisance along with the countless encroaching tendrils of prickly brambles is a constant and endless, early summertime chore for all teenage boys. These swift and barbed canes must be cut back continually, and this defensive work is a constant labour along with an indeterminate number of other jobs which need doing in and around every farm, croft and thatch in the land. Fences and gates need repairing around every enclosure, as does much around the hearth and home, especially to the thatching after the disturbing weight of winter snow and the recent fumigation. Whilst the women ever process the wool, jute and flax throughout the year, young girls are almost always out foraging in these bountiful times, bringing home a plethora of seasonal delights in their sacks and baskets from summer fruits and vegetables to mushrooms, nuts, and medicinal plants. The younger children are generally kept within their enclosures, where they feed the chickens, the goats and the pigs, whilst seeking out the eggs which their hens have secreted about their properties. Foraging for the werrin is a constant way of life and living, and it is hoped that the year 3913 since the creation of this wondrous earth will be a bounteous and a generous one for the people of Prydein. However, being a canny and a forward-thinking people, they know a lot of hard work is what will give these hopes substance, and it is the sweat of their brows which will fulfil their aspirations for a good and prosperous life for themselves and for their children.



Chapter Three.

The slatted window shutters of all these crowded domiciles were closed and latched, and the only noise on this dark cobbled street tonight came from the rowdy tavern on the corner ahead. The handful of local drunks retreated quickly into its smoky interior once they spotted the armed guards sweeping up this street toward them. More of their large, black-cloaked companions were stalking parallel streets to either side, clearing them of any civilians and securing the way ahead. They were all protecting the plain and anonymous wooden palanquin with its curtains drawn and which was carried by four muscular men, all dressed in the same black uniforms as these menacing looking guards around them. Clearly these men were Roman soldiers, not just by their manner of movement but also by their arms and armour which were unusually all black. These *private* Roman soldiers bore no identifying marks or symbols, yet this black armoured militia moved purposefully through this city's narrow streets with a supreme confidence, overlooked continually by shops and tall tenement blocks with their stained and chipped façades. Moving in pairs and in the synchronised manner of a highly trained and familiar company of men, these troops stepped almost silently as for urban duties they rarely wore the iron-studded caligae of the legionary, and so they pressed quietly ahead two more blocks on soft leather soles. Heading up from the Praetorian Camp, they had climbed the hill of the spear; the *Quirinal* and the tallest of these seven hills of Rome, named after Quirinus their God of war. Their destination was yet unseen behind these taller, more substantial buildings they now passed in the dark, and the men paused, crouching under the cold light of the stars above. A careful pair of scouts had entered a broad avenue at the top of this mount, and this deeply shadowed avenue ahead was lined by huge and

salubrious mansios built adjacent to the Circus Florae. As these soldiers looked carefully along their elm lined route ahead, both knew they had entered an exclusive, quiet, and wealthy area of the city. This dark band of soldiers arose from the shadows to join their point men, and this dangerous looking group headed for a tall, three storied building of enormous proportions and which dominated the head of this tree lined avenue. The huge mansion ahead commanded the terminus of this broad road, and its frontal aspect displayed complex levels of fine terracotta tiling, curving and swooping above rows of brightly painted shuttered doors and windows in three storeys. Curves of overlapping umber roof tiles overhung a row of tall doors in an impressive second floor veranda and which encompassed all three visible aspects to that fabulous property. As these clandestine men drew near, it was clear the address they sought this night was a veritable palace compared to the norm, especially as these exorbitant houses of the super-rich were mostly hidden from the street. They were far larger and more accommodating than their façades implied, many having large extended gardens and fountain parks in hidden rear courtyards. This particular mansio they had arrived at sat solid at the head of this avenue, crowning the hill they had just slogged up, and it was the shining gem in this elite row of stunning properties. This huge and palatial house they now approached so carefully possessed unmatched views of the surrounding city, and it was no secret who owned it. It featured a finely constructed, balustraded balcony of sculpted stone built around the two front faces of this stellar house and around the second floor. That impressive balcony was obviously accessed through a long line of tall double doors behind it, the tops of which were cast into deep shadow by the fluted overhang of dark red tiles. The rail of that column supported, stone balustrade was festooned with flowers of myriad hue and form, and their blooms cascaded over the long and sculpted stonework in vibrant drapes. This attractive veranda was up lit along both converging sides by unseen sources, and they could see it broadened out into a long, rectangular roof garden which must have cost the owner a small fortune to install. The face of this eye-catching mansio

was interrupted at its centre by a huge colonnaded portico sheltering the impressive front entrance to this property, and this stood large and stout at the head of a broad and balustraded, matching stone staircase leading up to it. Under the strict control of a big, black helmed and anonymous captain with an equally black cloak, these dark and nameless guards made a perimeter around the front of this huge and palatial complex before the officer raised a hand in signal, and they all crouched in the shadows. The palanquin they guarded then drew to a halt at the foot of this broad stone stairway leading up from the street, arching over the basement windows of this huge property and sweeping up to the impressive doorway. Marble steps climbed up to that imposing main entrance with its tall, double doors of oak and their beautiful bronze fittings, and it screamed status and wealth to all who approached it. A big man of advanced years stepped from this palanquin without a word, and he drew his toga back up around his broad shoulder before heading up these marble steps. He trod up them with a look of resignation about him and with a slight limp, with the captain of the black guard at his heels making a tall and athletic contrast. This grey-haired man had an experienced set to his broad shoulders and his noble head which marked him out as a man of action. These professional guards alluded to the man's power, whilst his rich attire and his costly manner of travelling bespoke his obvious successes in life. Although the hour was late, he used the bronze, lion's head knocker on the lefthand door and rapped it hard against its backplate, satisfied with the loud and penetrating sound that it made. After what seemed like only a few brief moments, the beautifully cast bronze viewing slot in this huge door slid aside, and a pair of large and doe like brown eyes looked out through this narrow opening.

"Yes, can I help you?" The brown eyes said in a calm, cultured tone.

"Pompey for Crassus I'm expected!" Pompey grunted.

The bronze plate slid back with a snap at his words and the door was unlocked and quickly opened. A tall and olive-skinned slave held the door open with a deep and respectful bow, and this slave was unusually clean,

well groomed, and scented. He looked well fed and was clothed exceptionally well for a slave, but a slave he was, as the tattooed letters of ownership; MLC were clear to see on his forehead. These letters however had been drawn in an artistic curve over the left eyebrow in a fine curling script, offering visual proof as to this good-looking man's status in the household, as most slaves' initials of ownership were big, crude, and ugly things done in haste and with not a scrap of regard for the recipient. It was public knowledge that Crassus' own, very lucrative school for slaves provided the elites of Rome with many excellent captive and unpaid workers. These had been broken and moulded by his slave masters into what was required by Crassus' wealthy patrons, and this young man was clearly one of them.

Pompey strode into the stunning marble atrium of this mansion and looked around, nodding his grey head at the lavish and enormous mosaic floor of the finest quality he had ever seen, matched in worth by the colourful and exquisite wall paintings and the pale marble statuary. The high ceilinged and cool interior was magnificently furnished, and Pompey took it all in as this was his first visit to this particular city mansion of tonight's host. Tall, inlaid copper urns shared alcoves with taller and equally exotic statuary, superbly cast in bronze or sculpted from marble, and their elegant beauty graced many recesses around this atrium. There were a few unobtrusive servants or slaves posted in the corners and behind the broad columns, overlooked by a row of finely sculpted, marble busts. One of their master; the Consul himself sat in the centre, and the faces of his extended family adorned the row of candle lit niches in the walls to either side of his own dignified head. Broad and shallow dishes of round beaten copper had been placed around the cold but colourful floor of this atrium, some in tall alcoves and some in helpful locations on the mosaic. These wide and dimpled copper bowls were half filled with rose petal strewn water and on which floated a number of candles on circular, silver rafts of superb quality. There was more than a dozen of these floor lanterns in this stunning atrium, and their flickering up light gave life to the cold marble and the deeply shadowed faces in the alcoves. Standing

in this cool and vast hallway, Pompey summed up the owner of this mansion in his mind now and as he prepared to meet him once again.

Consul Marcus Licinius Crassus, easily the wealthiest man in Rome had escaped the bloody pogrom of Gaius Marius as a younger man over thirty years previously. Both his oldest and a younger brother had taken their own lives to evade capture and certain death in the horrifying finale to the Octavian war in these blood washed city streets those years ago. Marius himself barely escaped execution at Minturnae, and he had fled immediately to Africa when General Sulla *Felix* had marched on Rome to reclaim his command from him, naming Marius a 'public enemy' along with his Tribune Sulpicius Rufus. General Sulla was a leader of the *optimates* which sought to maintain senatorial supremacy against the populist reforms advocated by the *populares*, these headed by Marius, all leading up to the Italian revolt and what amounted to a civil war. Marius' patron Lucius Cornelius Cinna was Julius Caesar's father-in-law, and he had also been forced to flee the city by Gnaeus Octavius' brutish gangs when Octavius, his erstwhile colleague deposed Cinna for repeatedly supporting the 'landless' populares claims for full franchise and a vote. Cinna opposed Sulla and the optimate elites publicly, repeatedly and vociferously, and his powerful call for reform in the sharing of Roman power had initiated that war. Gaius Marius along with his son Rufus; his experienced tribune and all their exiled men had awaited their opportunity to return to Rome from distant Africa and to reap their deferred vengeance on their enemies, preparing for their return as those harrowing events played out on the fraught streets of Rome. Cinna was able to gather significant support in Italy however and from some ten legions, including the ferocious Samnites. On receiving news of this, Marius and his son ended their exile in Africa and took ship with Rufus and their men to Rome and to General Cinna and his legions. Landing at Etruria, Marius and his son gathered a bigger army there and placed themselves, Rufus and all their men under Cinna's command to challenge and to defeat Octavius. Cinna's vastly superior army coerced the senate into opening the gates of the city, and so Cinna and Marius took rude advantage of this

fatal error, entering Rome and there began murdering the leading supporters of General Sulla, including Octavius and many hundreds of others. The young Crassus, Pompey's infamous host this night had been away with relatives in Hispania when the infamous Marius, his son, Cinna, Rufus and all their legions had entered Rome thirty years ago with such murderous intent, slaughtering so many aristocrats and innocents, it was a sad and enduring example of notorious Roman infamy and ruthlessness. Fourteen noble heads were taken in that internecine massacre including six former consuls, and their heads were shockingly exhibited in the forum by Marius' murderous and blood splattered troops. Crassus however had survived this dark period in Rome's history through his fortuitous absence, and in those three intervening decades, the great man had clearly been extremely industrious and spectacularly successful.

"Please follow me your honour." This polished slave prompted evenly, breaking Pompey's reverie and indicating the broad sweep of a majestic, marble staircase which dominated this atrium and curved upwards to the apartments and the floors above.

Pompey followed this smart slave up these spectacular and highly polished stairs with a scowl as there was something irritating about his unruffled smugness, but he followed him nonetheless, just as his captain followed him. They were led up this magnificent, curving flight of red-streaked, balustraded marble stairs, past the first-floor apartments and further, up to the second floor where in a long and bright chamber, a row of tall double doors which lined one wall had all been flung open to the evening air. These two guests stepped through a pair of these tall open doors into an oasis of vibrant green growth bejewelled with beautiful blooms, filling the air with their heady scents, and the tinkling sound of lively water nearby soothed the atmosphere. They were led through a central avenue in this surprising roof garden by the tall and graceful slave, to an attractive clearing at the northeastern corner and to where their host awaited them. Consul Marcus Licinius Crassus stood with a smile as they approached, holding his hand out.

“Salvae Pompey!” He beamed, and Pompey gripped Crassus’ forearm in his hand in the familiar way, and although they greeted each other cordially, there was always too an undercurrent of competitive tension between these two giants of men, but it was rare when either man gave any outward sign of this.

“Salvae Crassus.” Pompey nodded in return.

“Welcome to my humble home, it is good to see you again old friend.” Crassus added affably as they broke the handshake, and Crassus held out his hand in invitation to the big but low table surrounded by couches and comfortable chairs, all of which sat on a raised stone platform allowing an unobstructed view of the city around them. “Please put yourself at ease my old friend.” Crassus welcomed him as he reclined back on his couch. “I do love these balmy summer nights, don’t you? Are you hungry Pompey? You don’t look it!” He offered, his eyes twinkling, but his guest showed no amusement, and even though they were committed allies they could not disguise the tension in the air from their two huge egos and their oversized personalities, but they had learned to work around it to their mutual success, at least when their moods allowed.

“Humble, eh?” Pompey replied dourly, glancing around himself. “Mm, no thank you Crassus I have already eaten, but some wine would be appreciated to wash the foul taste of the streets from my throat.” The Consul nodded with a grimace, taking one of the couches opposite. “Do you never tire of your lifelong pursuit of wealth Crassus?” Pompey asked him pointedly, still looking around at this fabulous and ostentatious roof garden and the swooping curves of umber tiles roofing this stunning property, and the weariness in his tone was somewhat revealing.

Crassus regarded his esteemed guest shrewdly for a moment before responding.

“Do you never tire of your lifelong pursuit of power Pompey?” He countered in a similar tone, but smiling, and the most powerful man in Rome smirked in return this time, nodding his head in wry amusement.

"Anyway, I hear that you have invested in a rather large commercial enterprise of your own this year, on the Campus Martius?" Crassus challenged him with an arched eyebrow and a shrewd smirk, tactfully omitting the term *theatre*. Pompey's new and controversial complex had been founded last year, and that sprawling compound was all but complete. It lay the other side of this great city, and with seating for twenty thousand people it could guarantee the Consul's financial future. That grandiose structure apparently has a three-hundred-foot-wide stage, and it boasts a three-story *scaenae frons* flanked with elaborate and expensive statues. Although currently outlawed, it could be Rome's first permanent theatre, and Pompey's profiteering vision when finally opened promised to be a great reaper of wealth if all went well and certain *legalities* were overcome. Pompey just shrugged his beefy shoulders at the indictment.

"It is essentially a temple to Venus Crassus, but it does have some....well, financial and artistic aspects." He demurred, refusing to meet Crassus' gaze. "One must speculate to accumulate, you of all people should appreciate that Crassus, and anyway, I needed somewhere to assemble and to address my supporters." He proposed more brightly, looking around himself once more, but perhaps with a little less condescension.

"I think it's a wonderful idea Pompey and I admire your foresight. I look forward to the opening night and to Clodius Aesopus' performance. You will give me a *theatre* tally won't you Pompey!" Crassus asked him with a twinkle in his eye.

Pompey looked shrewdly at his host, as he was always amazed at the man's knowledge of any and all happenings in this city, but he was never sure if the man was serious or toying with him, and he smiled carefully in response.

"Of course Crassus, you will be most welcome if it goes ahead. You will have the very finest seat in the house, right next to mine." His own eyes twinkled with the offer, as his guest's presence would be sure to add a

certain public drama to the currently *illegal* proceedings. “I may have to postpone the opening night however due to some damnable regulation, but you may not be in Rome anyway!” He added with a scowl, knowing Crassus was planning a long-distance campaign in Parthia, and he may not be in Rome for the grand opening for which approval was proving so difficult to get, even for Pompey.

In Rome, power and prestige came with military success. Wealth could buy you power, but it was foreign conquest which ensured real fame and respect among the elites. Crassus had the wealth but only a fraction of the military prestige of Pompey, and Parthia offered him an opportunity for glory in vanquishing Rome’s largest remaining enemy, and he was already deep into the planning.

The critics, the politicians and the plebs will be clambering over each other to witness the opening of Pompey’s theatre, as prior to its construction permanent stone theatres had been forbidden across the city. So, to circumvent this ruling, Pompey had the complex built on the *Campus Martius* which lies outside of the *Pomerium*; the sacred boundary which divides the city itself from the *Ager-Romanus*; the ground immediately outside the city’s walls. Pompey had worked tirelessly and had parted with much gold to gain authorization from the senate to build on the campus, and even though he obtained consent to build his ‘temple complex’, a stone-built *theatre* was still officially outside the remit, and so he was forced to disguise his intentions. Disguising the opening night’s *spectacular* was proving more difficult, especially as he was attempting to get Clodius Aesopus; a renowned tragic actor out of retirement for the first performance. Political commentators had used this rumour vociferously, revealing precisely what Pompey’s Martius Complex had been built for, and his opponents were having a field day with the Consul’s patent mendacity. In his own justification, Pompey had indeed built a fabulous and ornate temple to Venus Victrix. It had been erected above a grand, stage like construction that much was true, and at the back of the many sloping, theatre-like and curved rows of seating facing it. That huge

and colonnaded temple to Venus had been constructed at the highest point of that whole, vast structure and so that the Goddess overlooked the audience from behind them, offering her blessings and looking down upon the whole stone built circular structure from her elevated plinth, and it had seemed natural to Pompey when he had first discussed the complex with his architects. Pompey claimed that he had not built a theatre at all, but rather a large and ornate temple of Venus, to which the necessary and facing stage for the ceremonies to her adoration had been built and the steps of worship had then been added, facing her ceremonial dais. Those long, curving rows of steps did very much take the form of seating, and they did face a huge timber structure which looked remarkably like a wide stage, unfortunately giving the inclined and stepped approach to the temple of Venus Victrix the *aspect* of a theatre, and it had become a city-wide joke. As patent as the masquerade was, Pompey achieved the approval, began construction immediately and never looked back.

“Indeed my old friend, I may be on expedition when your theatre opens, but if I’m still in Rome I wouldn’t miss the opening night for the world, especially if you manage to secure the performance of Clodius, whom I adore.” Crassus smiled broadly across at Pompey, being a renowned lover of the arts. “Our very finest Falernian wine for our guest Adriann and your captain?” Crassus offered with another beaming smile, looking across at the soldier with an arched eyebrow, but the black cloaked officer refused with a raised hand and took a seat some distance away, looking down at the streets and his dark circle of watchful men, almost hidden in the shadows of the elm trees far below.

A fine advertisement for Crassus’ slave academy, Adriann, the sleek looking slave poured a good measure of red wine into a gilt goblet and placed it in front of Pompey with a deep and formal bow before topping up his master’s goblet and placing the jug on the low table. Pompey ignored the slave and looked carefully at his effusive host across the polished burr-walnut top of this long table and which was strewn with silver dishes, filled with all manner of delicacies. There sitting opposite him was the

second side of their increasingly controversial triumvirate and by far the richest man in Rome. Crassus was dressed in a fine, belted tunic of pale green this evening in a classic Greek style, and the square cut neck, hem and cuffs were edged with a stylised, keyed border of expertly embroidered gold thread, matching the gold on his powerful fingers. The familiar face across this table was tanned and chiselled below the familiar iron-grey hair and the prominent, bulbous nose and his strong dimpled jaw, all of which gave him a hard look. Crassus had lively intelligent eyes, and his posture and his manicured appearance belied completely his capabilities and his sixty years of age. The general who had seventeen years previously covered himself in glory during the third Servile war, infamously known as the Spartacus gladiator rebellion looked now to be a fit and powerful man in his early fifties. This legendary general then gave Adriann a brief nod and the slave departed elegantly and without a sound. A delightful water feature tinkled merrily behind Crassus and in a pretty corner of this fecund roof garden, and the early summer air was filled with the tiny and thrumming wings of wildly vivid hummingbirds as they darted here and there. The same air was headily fragrant with this garden's blooms of bougainvillea, peonies and wild roses, and it was a delight to the senses. Pompey looked south from this scented and luxurious viewpoint, between the terracotta pots of flowers and over the stone balustrade of this spectacular veranda, and he could see the dark shapes of the domed and colonnaded splendour of the Capitoline Hill in the distance, even the glinting snake of the Tiber behind it. Pompey wondered at the worth of this huge and stunning property, in the heart of Rome itself and with the most stupendous views of the capital, and this was only *one* of his host's long list of properties which included his fabulous Umbrian villa, farm and vineyard where Pompey had visited him on several occasions.

"I've had news." Crassus said bluntly, bringing Pompey's attention back to him with a questioning look. "He's prepared what ships he needs; his Legions are prepared and ready once more, and he is confident of his

customary success!" Crassus answered the question on his guest's face, stressing Caesar's own word with a smirk.

"Ay, he said that the last time. The alpha wolf is ever confident, but I fear he relies on Fortuna far too much for my comfort." Pompey countered sombrely, rubbing the stubble on his jaw. "You know the din of his opposition grows daily, and Cato, Ahenobarbus and all their cronies are making themselves very loud and very busy in building their case against him. They've had almost nine years to compile it since Caesar rashly spoke up for Catalinus in the senate, as you well know Crassus. Recently Cato has even called him a traitor; publicly, and he is determined to bring charges against him for both senatorial bribery and fraud, even acts against the republic! His debtors too have now jumped onto the cart of condemnation alongside those oh-so honourable *senators*!" He spat the last word out and Crassus chuckled in response, nodding in agreement. They both understood and had foreseen the backlash to Caesar's public statement in the forum eight years previously and at the time of the infamous conspiracy, where at an especially convened session called to discuss it, Caesar had rashly called for a fair trial and clemency for his fellow Patrician Lucius Catalina, publicly and on the marble floor of the senate. It had been a hugely hazardous act that neither of these men would have ever contemplated, but their general could be impulsive when he was sure he was in the right, which problematically was a constant state of mind. As a Praetor Elect, Caesar had done this despite the charges and the vociferous majority, who had bayed hotly for Catalina's immediate execution. At no small risk to himself, Caesar had delivered a speech of such logical eloquence that it had swayed many a senator who had sat on the fence that day, but it had made Caesar some implacable enemies at the same time. Accused with supporting the same plot to seize power by Cicero himself, some had condemned Caesar there and then for being complicit in the conspiracy, but Caesar's oratory excellence had won over those enemies, won the argument, and won the day. Some of the real leaders and arch conspirators of Catalina's bold but treasonous plot had never been uncovered let alone brought to justice in those nine

intervening years, and some of those who were charged had deflected their culpability, and they had escaped the judgement of *Aequitas* like rats fleeing a sinking ship. This situation is and has been like a suppurating sore to Cato Minor over these long years, giving credence to his accusations and retaining his allegiance of vengeful senators and elites, all of whom remained convinced that Caesar had been involved up to his risk-taking neck in the conspiracy. As yet however, they had struggled to prove it. By simple logic and to many a political commentator's private reasoning, their accusations should also be levelled at these two august gentlemen of the republic and the other two sides to Caesar's triumvirate, but Cato and his cohorts were anything but stupid and had chosen their fight carefully.

"I agree." Crassus said eventually. "It is a serious concern, and I too am informed that the call for his return to face the senate is growing by the hour, and I know you are asking yourself the question Pompey; should we continue to support our wardog, or should we cut our losses and abandon him?" Crassus asked him seriously, holding Pompey's gaze. "For me there is no question, as our over-confident general simply knows too much. Don't forget, he knows where most of our skeletons are buried, and I doubt you being his son-in-law, or being the father of his forthcoming grandchild will cut much ice with him. And if Caesar is brought low....?" He left the question hanging in the perfumed air as he took another long draught of the excellent wine. "Which reminds me Pompey how is Julia, she must be due about now surely?" He finished with a belch.

"She is Crassus, any day now, and it concerns me deeply as the auguries were not good." Pompey admitted with a frown.

Crassus surveyed his co-conspirator over the rim of the goblet, and he noticed the changes in the man since they had last met for the first time. Gone was the ever-forceful, indomitable general of such military legend and repute which Crassus knew so well and envied terribly. Here before him now was the very image of the nervously expectant father and it was at odds with what he knew of the man's character, but Pompey was a man

you underestimated at your peril. He had married young on his fourth attempt, taking Caesar's daughter Julia for his wife four years previously, which had not only bound the two men closer together it had fortified their political triumvirate to all their advantage, but Pompey seemed infatuated with his new bride to the point where in Crassus' private opinion, it had become unseemly of such an elevated and noble personage of Rome. The personal charms of Julia were unmistakeable, and although he considered her twenty years too young for his guest, she did make a wonderful and powerful partner to the Consul. Julia was a kind woman of great beauty and unimpeachable virtue, and although politics had prompted her marriage to a man old enough to be her father, she had taken to the union with remarkable aplomb and a feminine grace which had endeared her to the masses of Rome. In no time at all, Julia had come to realise that she possessed in Pompey a devoted husband, and so she was in return a devotedly dedicated wife to the Consul. It was rare indeed when an arranged marriage turns to real love, but it seems Pompey had found such a thing in Caesar's remarkable daughter, and she had discovered the same in him to all Rome's surprise. Pompey's devotion had reached new heights toward his pregnant wife in recent weeks however, and the erudite Crassus thought a moment before answering.

"Make sacrifice to Aesculapius Pompey, as the son of Apollo must surely sway the auguries and brighten Julia's fate!" Crassus offered seriously.

"You think I haven't done that every day for the last two weeks Crassus?" Pompey growled acidly in return, giving voice perhaps to his inner emotional fears. "I have prayed and made votive offering to the primary Goddess of childbirth herself; Juno Lucina, but Aesculapius, Minerva and even Apollo himself have all had their altars soaked in sacrificial blood to Julia's aid Crassus, but I thank you nonetheless for your concern." He demurred, looking down.

Crassus regarded Pompey with surprise again, as he seemed inordinately preoccupied with the impending birth of this child. With his young and

healthy wife being thirty years his junior Crassus was more concerned about her distracted husband at this moment, as he just wasn't himself. Rumours in the busy streets around Pompey's almost completed Mars Complex, and the reports of Crassus' own agents all suggested that this maturing conqueror was perhaps losing his lifelong interest in politics and military glory, devoting more and more of his valuable time to a timid and domestic life with his heavily pregnant young wife. In fact, to Crassus' disbelief, Pompey had been offered the governorship of Hispania Ulterior but had asked for a delay in the taking of the position until his wife had given birth and was assured of her health. Pompey had been grudgingly permitted to remain in Rome by the Senate, ostensibly to oversee the Roman grain supply as *Curator Annonae*, but it was clearly to keep the old general happy, as remaining in Rome and exercising his inestimable command through subordinates he would have the time needed to take care of more personal matters. This was so unlike the Consul and the General Pompey of old and the man whom Crassus had welcomed to the triumvirate with open arms, it unnerved him. With all that was at stake and in play across the empire this summer Crassus needed men of iron around him, and his eyes narrowed, becoming shrewd as his guest blustered on.

"Anyway, we are here to discuss Caesar are we not Crassus? And his claims that Prittan is wealthy is a fallacy in my opinion, and only a fool would accept that as a legitimate motive for prosecuting this second invasion no matter what label he puts on it. He's farting around in Bononia again, preparing for another risky invasion at enormous cost to us both and with an entirely dubious promise of profit once more, whilst our hard-won conquests and gains in Belgica and Greater Celtica dissolve away through criminal lack of governance!" Pompey growled again, shaking his big head but voicing both their concerns. "Haven't we Romans had enough wretched examples of political ambition getting in the way of successfully prosecuting a decent bloody war, or governing a wealthy vassal state?" He proposed with an arched eyebrow, and Crassus had to

agree with a dark chuckle, pleased that although well-hidden currently, some of the fire still smouldered in his guest.

“Oh yes my old friend, there have been many examples of that in our history. Sadly, Caesar has already used the ruse of pre-emption when he invaded Prittan the first time, and we know how that turned out regardless of the celebrations on his return.” Crassus reminded him, looking thoughtful too. “It won’t take a genius to work out that this invasion too is based on fabrication, but his ego driven desire for conspicuous achievement is one of his main weaknesses. That, and of course the age-old Roman sickness; *vengeance!* However, you do recall the irrational adoration of Caesar by the unwashed masses on his return Pompey, and the mindless festivities of last year’s *triumph* through these streets, and for what? Nothing! But Pompey, and I know it’s big but, but what if Caesar this time adds wild Prittania permanently to the inventory of Rome’s empire?” Crassus’ eyebrows arched as he let this prospect sink in, and he took a timely pause here to take another drink before continuing. “We both know he has a rare ability Pompey. He has the wit and the ingenuity to pull himself out of the deepest of shit smelling of roses, and he can make a silk purse from any sow’s ear with his eyes closed!” He added, and Pompey was forced to chuckle now at this undeniable truth.

“But the idiot has also skipped out on his debtors before, when he took the post of Praetor in Hispania!” Pompey spat, all humour evaporating quickly. “Does he think people just forget about these things? Especially coin!”

“He came through it to fight again though.” Crassus countered quietly and without looking up.

Pompey’s frown deepened. “Mm, just about and with your financial help Crassus, but what if the Gauls retake their conquered lands once he and his troops are at sea or in Prittania, cutting off any retreat?” Pompey asked him then, his face dour as he slapped his open hand with a fist.

"The sinister left hand always opposes the dextrous right!" Crassus used the old phrase in perfect context, pointing at Pompey's gesture with a grin.

"Huh very droll. I'm in no mood for your highbrow humour Crassus. I am worried that we will become embroiled in this debacle with Cato and his mob, and it could undo everything each of us has struggled to build our whole lives!" Pompey frowned at him. "And Caesar has left it so late for this invasion again! You know as well as I do how fickle the weather is on that part of the Gaulish coast and look what happened to him in Pritania last year! What if the autumn storms arrive early again and destroy the fleet and our legions? My Seventh great Jupiter's cock! Didn't my seventh sacrifice enough on his first farcical sojourn? There are so many unanswered questions Crassus and so many things which could go wrong again!" He cursed, throwing his hands up. "And of course, the great and infallible Caesar calls these immense, carbuncular fucking problems mere trifles!" He swore angrily, looking at his host for some crumb of comfort and hope, but Crassus just shook his head again and took a long draught of his wine, draining the cup.

"Labienus and two legions remain at Portus Itius, and we have our garrisons throughout Gaul to rely on, but my most recent intelligences do indicate..." Crassus said around another belch. "That although the tribes of Gaul are indeed gathering in revolt, led possibly by the Eburones or the Trevirii, I believe it to be nothing more than smoke and mirrors. There have been no real gatherings of any worrying size, nor have there been any serious *organised* attacks on our forces, and those same tribes are already falling out with each other over who will take command. As is so usual with those uncivilised barbarians, nobody seems able to make or to achieve a unified decision either way on who will lead them or what they should do next!" Crassus revealed with a wry grin as he reached for the large silver jug on the table.

"Then we shall thank Mars for small mercies Crassus. At least we can rely on those hairy-arsed heathens to set about each other rather than the real

enemy!” Pompey sighed, making them both smile grimly. “Let us hope the Prittans continue with the same proclivity. What more do we know of Prittania Crassus, how likely is he to succeed at this last-ditch venture of his and how profitable could it be to us?” Pompey asked Crassus pointedly, throwing more shadow over this proposed second invasion and questioning perhaps the risk-reward balance and the fearfully long odds of success, at least any success which they could count in coin.

“Pff who knows! His hurried discoveries of last year gave no encouragement of any *great* wealth, and he did not get even one sniff of the pearls and the tin at the top of our list!” Crassus admitted bitterly, grabbing a handful of shelled hazelnuts from the table, and Pompey nodded at this ubiquitous piece of information.

“They do produce many superb pearls in Prittania and so their oysters must be rare indeed. Alone they are not worth the effort as much as I love them, and I doubt their pearls could fund an invasion.” Pompey grumbled, shaking his big head. “All the noble metals exist there that much was clear, but are there any *real* deposits there; large mineral resources which could sustain more than just a few hundred trinkets?” Pompey pressed him with a cynical look, and Crassus just shook his head again in response, chewing morosely.

“Again, who knows Pompey. There were rumours of vast beds of freshwater oysters in the northwest which give up the Prittans’ unmatched and super valuable pearls that everyone wants these days. We also have stories of great deposits of tin, silver and lead from captured tribesmen, even tales of gold mines to the southwest, all of which could make us extremely wealthy if we controlled them, but they are just rumours.” He told him bleakly, giving Pompey a grave look as he refilled their goblets from the exquisite silver jug. “And anyway, the Prittans are not about to just hand them all over, and I doubt Caesar has the force to subdue the whole country. We shall just have to wait and see Pompey!” He added with raised eyebrows, and his guest frowned again in response.

“Marvellous, so it really is a throw of the unknown dice once more then?” Pompey grunted, accepting the wine with a nod. “What if he loses my legion damn him and my banners? My Eagle?” This Pompey asked more of himself as he had levied the 7th Legion he called ‘Claudia’ himself ten years previously in Hispania. Pompey had created their Bull and Lion banner personally, being immensely proud of their famed military successes in that following decade. The thought of his young father-in-law losing his Claudia Legion and their famous banners in a last-ditch gamble to save his own reputation made Pompey’s blood boil. This potential destruction of his beloved legion caused murderous thoughts to rear in his mind as he still felt a fierce ownership toward those men. His Seventh had already paid a high and withering price for Caesar’s first shambles of an invasion, and he begrudged any further losses to his legion in a repeat performance. Also, he had much of his own gold invested in the young general, none of which had been earmarked ‘high-risk invasion fund’ when he’d handed it over. Pompey took a deep breath then and calmed himself as stress always flared up his painful ulcers, and he took another drink of Crassus’ excellent wine to settle himself.

“We may have to be a little creative Crassus in the solution of our problem, and.....er, reach out to our young and headstrong general.” Pompey offered darkly, drawing a hard look from his host.

“Mm well, it may not have to come to such a creative end just yet Pompey, as I have put a great deal of thought into our position, and in this regard, I have had a document drawn up, one of dissolution of the triumvirate and our joint condemnation of Caesar, for both his growing debts and his senatorial fraud. It outlines Caesar’s fraudulent misappropriation of Rome’s funds granted by us for the consolidation of Greater Gaul, *not* to build his own fleet of personal ambition. This was gold which came out of our own pockets too and which Caesar has squandered on these unauthorised, risky and expensive invasions. We will both sign this back dated document tonight, but it will look as though we signed it long before he committed to his first mission, and we will get your captain

and mine to witness the document. A little something that we will keep in abeyance until we see what develops in Pritania *this* time, that is if he ever makes landing there. And if he doesn't and drowns at sea? Well....." He had no need to finish the sentence and Pompey nodded at his wisdom.

"His 'fleet of personal ambition' Crassus, I like that." Pompey smirked.

"Your document of dissolution is an excellent idea, and I agree, that we must now wait and see if Fortuna really has our general fixed in her eye. If he fails again and somehow survives to return here, he won't live long enough to pay his debts or to see a trial where he could denounce either one of us. There will be no comfortable time behind the bars of Mamertine Prison for Gaius Julius Caesar, nor will he suffer the short and final flight from the high cliffs of the *Tarpeian Rock* when he dies. If he balks at suicide and returns to Rome in failure, he won't live an hour after landing." Pompey growled menacingly. "As I will personally make sure of that Crassus, but if he succeeds?" Pompey added with a shrug and another questioning look. His host chuckled cynically once more in response.

"If he succeeds this time in establishing vassal territory and gains good land to consolidate in that mysterious world, especially the pearl bearing rivers and lakes of that country he covets so much, it could transform Caesar's situation and our own. If he captures wild and primitive hostages and unworldly, fantastic booty and bags full of pearls to bring home from this second attempt it will be regarded a huge success, especially by Caesar. If he discovers their mines and their major mineral deposits it will be another miracle of the Goddess Fortuna indeed, and General Caesar will have had his 'customary' success once more, and he will of course arrive home wealthy again and in celebrated glory!" He growled, giving Pompey a pointed look. "He will have another longed-for triumph through these streets below, and all his past misdemeanours and sins will be washed away and absolved once more." Crassus opined, a far-off look in his eyes. "How many triumphs have you had now Pompey, two? No three!" Crassus said with a smirk, and he stood then, stroking an ear lobe

as he thought. "We too will be well rewarded of course in the subtle ways in which we both seek, and it will be a glorious homecoming and a strengthening of our triumvirate Pompey, for as we both know, all Romans love a pageant." He stated, shrugging philosophically. "Hardly likely I know. He is far more likely to be drowned at sea or slaughtered by those mythical, red-haired monsters of war. Although I have never seen them, I fear those gigantic tribesmen that we heard all the blood curdling stories about Crassus, but as ever, Caesar calls these things minor irritations as of course, *he* fears nothing. In view of all this and of the monumental task now set before our young general, I thought it wise to keep several options open to us." Crassus nodded sagely, in complete agreement with himself. "Whatever unfolds in Pritania Pompey, he has his officers, five legions and his cavalry this time, so it is firmly in the hands of the Gods as it has always been!" He added with another shrug.

Pompey wore a thoughtful but resigned look on his face as he picked up the fine golden goblet from the polished walnut.

"So be it then Crassus! To patience, fair winds and to quarrelling barbarians! Mars, Apollo and Fortuna; *Salvae!*" He declared, holding up his goblet for the celestial toast, and with a nod, his affluent host joined him.



Chapter Four.

Morwena sat exhausted but nervous on the cushioned benches in the *lle aros reiol*, awaiting her turn in this sumptuous chamber reserved for dignitaries, and waiting to be brought before King Bellnor in this vast fortress of his; CaerUswr. Going over the words again in her mind as she had the whole journey here, she gnawed at an already ragged fingernail as she weighed and tested each word again. It was vital she make a breakthrough today, as this vicious infighting between her husband and his father had to stop. Her hand maiden began fussing around her again and she shooed her away. Being two weeks past giving birth was stress enough without a servant flapping about. Coming here had been a daylong struggle in a bumpy carriage, even though she was still recovering and had been advised to remain in bed by the meddyg. She was tough and this was important, so, she and a horse guard of a dozen seasoned warriors and this young servant had braved the twenty-five-mile journey south, whilst her hand maidens and wetnurses were left caring for Bellicca back at DunRheadr. Little Bellicca was rude and healthy, with fat pink limbs and a set of lungs which could already compete with the huge bellows in Breged's great war forge. She was totally demanding and with the most ferocious temper even now, and Bellicca would chew her wetnurses' nipples raw, as is right and fitting for a princess with such a glorious future. That is if the wild prophesies of the often drug addled uati are ever confirmed. Fated even before she was born, Bellnor's commonly apoplectic baby granddaughter was foreseen by the Uati of Breganta as the eventual mother of a great and valiant, *future* warrior-queen. This mythical and future offspring of hers would apparently one day make her eternal legend defending Prydein from a foreign invader, far into the future. Those wild and terrifying creatures of the druids had fallen well short of convincing this headstrong young lady of that dubious and

remotely distant potential, however. That impressively far imagined female, in line with tradition would one day be named *Cartysmandua* in honour of her regal taid and Morwena's new husband. It was a long-standing family tradition in Breged to name a new baby after a grandparent, and so her daughter Bellicca too had been named for her famous taid, whom Morwena nervously waited to see this important new day. Whatever her daughter's future would be in this hard and uncertain world, Morwena knew at least that she would be blessed with the comfort and education of an aristocrat. Bellicca already made a constant and aristocratic impression on her present-day life, keeping a veritable gaggle of hand maidens and rotating wetnurses rushing about the royal crèche like chickens smelling a fox. Her husband Prince Cartysman had blushed deeply when he had been presented with his bloody daughter at her birth, but since that day he had remained less than enthusiastic to Morwena's concerned opinion, but that was ever the attitude of the warrior father, especially the highly privileged and the royal kind. Although she thought her husband would come around and begin perhaps to show his love for Bellicca once this screaming and demanding stage had passed and things became a little calmer in the nursery, his continued disinterest had begun to concern her. Perhaps once the problems with his father are firmly and finally resolved, her husband may feel more inclined to put down his hunting and war gear to adopt the rather heavier but softer mantle of fatherhood.

The druids and druidens had added another level of unwanted stress and interminable ritual to the nursery at DunRheadr, even as it was being prepared several weeks before the birth. The priesthood was convinced that Morwena's baby Bellicca would in her maturity and one long-distant day in the future give birth to the future talisman of the Bregantau and all the Houses of greater Breged. In some drawn out and febrile, blood-soaked sacrificial ceremony, the uati had seen baby Bellicca's fully grown daughter charging an unseen enemy in a war chariot considerably in the future. She was doing this with such a wild and unrestrained ferocity, it had inspired the bards of Breganta to begin creating englyns for this

mysterious warrior queen, whose mother had only just been born. The daily ceremonies and rituals around Bellicca were now getting beyond a joke, and Morwena was determined to get her husband to kick them out, or at least to restrict their frantic divinations on their daughter's future daughter's behalf, as however glorious Bellicca and her offspring's predicted future would be, the constant *toing* and *froing* of the priests was having a negative impact on her feeding and her bedtime routines. Once the over excited priesthood had given this unconceived, far future child a name and had begun making votive offering to 'Cartysmandua ferch Bellicca ferch Cartysman ap Bellnor', their attentions increased dramatically, and it infuriated Morwena. Apart from the rushing about of tonsured druids and druidens and the constant prayers amid the pungent smoke from the smudge bowls, Morwena felt it demeaned Bellicca in a way, almost overlooking the future promise of her own royal daughter to venerate her unconsidered and non-existent progeny. Morwena was sure Bellicca would like to have a daughter one day, if she ever has issue and if it does in fact turn out to be a girl, which Morwena had to concede was highly likely given her own family history. For a practical, down to earth girl from Tref Ebor unaccustomed to the religious rituals of a royal court it seemed ridiculous to worship that which is yet to exist, but she had endured it all with as much grace as she could muster, but her patience was beginning to wear thin. Over and above all these concerns was the most pressing one to her, and Morwena just could not allow the high king of Breged; her *chwegrún* and Bellicca's grandfather and namesake to *miss* her daughter's sacred foundation ceremony due to some misplaced acrimony between him and his son Cartysman, as so much had been put in place for his presence and to their future. Morwena shifted her weight on this unfamiliar bench to ease her aching back, and she shrugged her mouth thinking her words may be superfluous and wasted anyway as Bellnor and Cartysman had become intractable of late, and so she alone had been left in a position to do something about it. She wanted her father-in-law to be present at the birth celebration of her daughter on the first day of the month of Celyn, which was in three days' time. Morwena

knew her husband wanted his father there too even though he would never admit it publicly. They had discussed it many times these past weeks and planned well for it, but Morwena had come here today to make sure.

Morwena ferch Baglo *Creuol* was the youngest of seven sisters, and she had spent every waking minute of her childhood thrusting herself forward for *her* share of this precarious life. It was this enduring habit of feverish acquisition, ingrained into her persona since she could walk. It was this visceral need for personal gain which had propelled her to this endeavour today, and her eyes were bright with it in the gloom of this royal waiting room. Her father had been an officer in service to old Queen Morgu of the Paurisa; Breged's eastern vassals, and it had taken up most of his time. *Penaig* Baglo the 'cruel' had been the captain of the guard at CaerEbor and had raised a large but notoriously wild and boisterous family in the town outside that fortress, largely in his absence. His busy, often frantic oval thatch in Tref Ebor had been Morwena's place of birth and it had been her whole life until last Lughnas when she had caught Prince Cartysman's eye at the seasonal fayre in the town. He had come calling the very next day and it had been a whirlwind of kaleidoscopic images since that moment, both becoming inseparable within days of meeting each other. Moving to her new husband's impressive fortress of DunRheadr and her palatial apartments there had been an astonishing eye-opener for this pretty young girl, and it was as if she had reached Afalon itself. Knowing nothing but the overcrowded thatch of her infamous father with its constant stream of male visitors and the mud splattered, seedy streets of Tref Ebor, just touring Breged with her regal betrothed in that fantastic open carriage had been a truly transformative experience. Being strewn with flowers by their subjects and the unrestrained adoration of the werrin lining the streets leading up to her fabulous new fortress had opened a whole new world up to Morwena, and she had soared to the stars with the thrill of it. She still had to pinch herself now and again as she walked the beautiful courtly halls and the chambers of this huge capital caer in her new clothes, and as she swanned around her own

beautiful private lodgings at DunRheadr, not believing how she had been elevated. Her pregnancy had sealed the deal in many ways, and her handfasting to the crown prince of all Breged had followed soon after. Her devious mind had been focused on *keeping* this newfound status above all else since that glorious day, and fear of losing it all had motivated this apprehensive visit to court today. If Morwena was going to secure this fantastic future for herself and her daughter, her efforts here today could prove vital. She was determined to connect properly with Bellnor today and for the first time, as although she knew the king had little time for her, it was imperative to all her own and her husband's future plans that Bellnor attend the celebration in his granddaughter's honour in three days' time. Preparations were well in hand and the feast will be held at her and Cartysman's more northern DunRheadr, and so she was resolved to confirm the great king's attendance today.

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The legions were assembled in the much-enlarged Fortress Bonon today to bear witness in their shining formations, as when a man enrolled in military service to Rome he swore an oath known as the *sacramentum*, something every soldier within these walls had sworn. The sacramentum was an inviolate, Gods witnessed oath which every soldier had sworn to the Senate and to the Republic before their officers, their peers, their priests, and their Gods. This holy oath stated that the soldier would dutifully fulfil his conditions of service, or face punishment up to and inclusive of death. Discipline in this army was extremely rigorous by necessity, and the great general leading these legions had the power to summarily execute any one of these soldiers under his command. Tradition dictates that any punishments inflicted by a commander on one or more of his subordinates be divided into punishments for 'military crimes' or 'unmanly acts', and although they are scratched into the waxed tablets of the scribes as reflecting this division, there is little difference in the harsh nature of the punishments. Although some minor indiscretions may only be given a '*pecunaria multa*'; a simple fine in the form of a

deduction from the pay allowance, a '*gradus delectio*'; a reduction in rank or a loss of advantages gained from length of service could also be expected for repeated small infractions. For more serious misdemeanours a '*castigatio*' was administered, and this amounted to being walloped soundly by your centurion with his heavy vine staff. Graver misconduct was invariably punished by a brutal thrashing with a 'flagellum' or a *short whip* by the same man, a punishment usually reserved for the 'volones'; their euphemistically named slave *volunteers*. A *castigatio* could also be administered to the legionaries in exceptional circumstances, and it was greatly feared for good reason. For really *serious* crimes, a '*fustuarium*', or a '*bastinado*' was the usual judgement, and both these punishments were invariably grave and violent. Extremely damaging and often crippling if not fatal beatings were the norm for these two terrifying sentences, usually carried out by the rest of the condemned man's contubernium with either stout staffs or rocks, and a recipient who lived through it to be a cripple could count himself extremely fortunate. Summary execution was also levied on those deemed worthy as every man here knew, having sworn to the same on his *sacramentum*, so, today's procedure had come as no surprise to the veterans here.

Repeated, rising tones were heard abruptly from the Buccinators' curving horns, drawing the attention of all these soldiers. Two gleaming optio principalii appeared from a centurion's tent at these blasts and with a naked prisoner secured between them. This large, tented officer's mess was situated on the southwestern quadrant of the camp, off the *via sagularis* which is the inner perimeter pathway, and this gravel road went all the way around the encampment. Behind the perimeter *via sagularis* lay the ranks of kid leather sleeping tents, set out within these walls in their groupings and between the narrow footpaths which divide them. This larger leather tent of the centurions had served as a temporary holding place for the prisoner this day, and a venue where the *quaestionarius* could employ his specialised training and techniques. The *quaestionarius* of this camp was a dour and utterly merciless senior centurion of the 2nd cohort of the tenth who had served as interrogator of this man coming

from his own cohort and legion. Torture had not been required of this feared and experienced officer as the soldier to be punished here today had been captured just before he could join his comrades and dash himself to death off the nearby cliffs. He was one of a group of young recruits who had let their imaginations run amok and had joined something of a minor rebellion among the deserters. It was those younger, inexperienced tirones who were untested in battle who had run. They could not face the impending and perceived *suicidal* voyage across that wild channel, as some of the things they had heard of terrifying Prittania had been blown up into myth and horror from those who had survived the first invasion, especially their retold nightmares of the notorious and flame haired *Gadwyre*. Lurid tales of these monsters of war had unnerved them and had dashed away the last vestiges of their courage. On the eve of this consequential invasion launch, a large group of these terrified men had escaped via the western gate and had fled into the hills of Bononia, but only one had returned to face the wrath of General Caesar. Being caught and surrounded climbing a rocky escarpment in their frantic escape attempt, this prisoner's fleeing comrades had all leapt to their deaths, choosing suicide over crossing that cursed channel or facing Roman punishment. However, they had been fractionally quicker than Manius and had all perished on the rocks below that ridge. This captured soldier looked exhausted and utterly spent now, having to be virtually carried out of the tent and up this gravel path. The two senior optios supporting him had each been nominated acting *tesserarii* for today's proceedings, and these appointed guard commanders' vicelike grips held their prisoner firmly by his arms. Manius' hands were tightly bound in front of him with a leather thong, and these grim optios frog marched him around the *via sagularis* until they approached the '*via praetoria*'; the arrow straight road which cuts across the lower part of this large expanse of parade ground known as the praetorium. The trio turned right off this perimeter road in sharp form and headed up the lower half of the *via praetoria*; the central road which led away from the main gate. Marching up this broad sandy path dividing the

parade ground of this walled fortress, they made their way toward the centre and to the general's sprawling accommodations.

No one had wanted the appalling spectre of '*decimatio*' to rear its ugly head here; the dreaded punishment meted out for massed indiscipline, or if no culprit was caught for a serious crime and nobody stepped forward, as it then became a complete lottery. These days, the Cohort selected for punishment by decimation was divided firstly into its centuries as usual on parade, but then further to each century's individual *contubernii*. Each *optio* would then draw lots to determine which ten-man group would take the lottery of death, including their *decanus* and their terrified servant. These ten chosen men who lived so closely together would then draw their own lots from a clay jar, and the soldier who pulled out the black token was fallen upon immediately by his nine comrades, often with clubs or rocks and invariably until he had been battered to death. The remaining nine men were punished too although in a more ritualistic form, as they were given rations of horse barley instead of wheat and forced to eat this animal fodder with bloodied hands outside the fortress. They were also made to sleep outside the fort that night, near the *porta decumana*, and they were not permitted to wash the blood of their comrade off their hands until sunrise when they were readmitted through this 'rear gate'. This archaic and terrifying punishment of *decimatio* had been resurrected by General Marcus Licinius Crassus eighteen years previously, and it had come straight from their ancient and bloody past. It was during the infamous Spartacus gladiator rebellion known as the Third Servile War when two of Crassus' legions had disobeyed his direct orders *not* to engage the rebel enemy. As a result of their rash and blood rush attack, they had suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of Spartacus' skilled and accomplished fighters, and Crassus' response to their disobedience had been swift and brutal as expected. This sordid tale had been imparted to every new *probatio* and *tirone* standing here in this fortress as a stark and salutary reminder of their sworn *sacramentum*, and every man here knew the story intimately. Not a man to delegate such an onerous duty, General Crassus had assembled the survivors of those two legions before him that

day and had personally pulled out every 10th man himself as he walked across and in between the ranks. Each man selected by him was then immediately beaten to death by the other comrades around him. The two disgraced legions that historic day had been those of Consuls Gellius and Clodianus who had long returned to Rome in reduced state, but they were both widely known as Pompey's own men and were effectively under the protection of his large and powerful political wing. Gellius possessed the cunning of a harbour rat and the hide of an elephant, and he had always been the consummate politician, rising again in those intervening years to his current position as Censor. The setback to Clodianus' career was only temporary too, as with the support of Pompey and now the added patronage of the all-powerful, all-wealthy Crassus, both Gellius and Clodianus were appointed Censors and continued to enjoy the privileged lives of Rome's leading citizens. The survivors of these insubordinate legions of Gellius and Clodianus had been joined together seven years ago in Hispania and by their General Caesar into one newly levied Legio he named his 10th. His Legio X had since gained much notoriety throughout Hispania Ulterior and Gaul, becoming known familiarly as Caesar's Legio X *Equestris* since their Gaulish exploits. They had proved themselves completely loyal to him and utterly steadfast in battle time and again, but a shadow hung over the general's favoured legion today and their honour had been thrown under some close scrutiny. The soldiers of Legio X were arrayed in their finery in the rising warmth of this morning, standing to *intente* in the western half of this fortress, whilst the soldiers of the other three legions faced them in the sandy dust across the praetorium from the east. To another harsh chorus from the buccinators, two 2nd file centurions of the 10th then stepped from their own tent and marched toward the spot on the parade ground to where the prisoner was being dragged by their two senior optios, and this doomed young man was well-known to all as one Manius; the simple recruit from the 10th who was no swimmer and was known to be terrified of the water. The horror stories making the rounds, and his abiding terror of any sea voyage had broken his nerve and he had joined those Gallic deserters, sneaking out of the fort with them

last night. His face spoke volumes of his fear and his shame both, gripped tightly as he was by these two granite-faced optios this morning. Manius was not alone in expecting a savage beating and perhaps even execution here today, but his nakedness had been a surprise to him. All he could do was pray to his Gods that whatever punishment Caesar had decreed for his desertion, it would be a quick one. All these arrayed ranks of soldiers were thankful for the appearance of the condemned Manius, relieved at the confirmation of their release from the dreaded lottery of death, but their eyes were hard, as all knew the consequences of desertion from this army. The senior soldiers in this assembly knew from bitter experience that the crime of desertion especially was filed alongside the crime of treason, and the punishments for such stupidity were invariably fatal.

The centrepiece to where Manius was being marched was dominated by the big stone watering trough they used for their horses, and which they had rudely requisitioned from the nearby village. It had been used for many generations by the local barbarians for watering their own animals as it had been fed by a small, freshwater spring there held sacred by them. These acquisitive Romans had torn this long and heavy, rectangular stone bath from its ancient foundations when they had first stormed through this coastal territory several years previously. With complete disregard to any local opposition, they had dug it out and had it transported on a cart, up to their newly outlined fortress and had then installed it under another spring they had discovered just outside the planned eastern gate of the fort for precisely the same purpose. This ancient stone trough had been crudely carved on its three outer faces, but these swirling patterns were worn to almost non-existence by its great age. The Romans were unaware that they had interfered with the natural balance of two local water spirits, and cared less when informed, denying all entreaties for its return by the priests of the nearby village. Its presence in the centre of the parade ground this morning seemed a mystery to many of the younger onlookers, especially the wide-eyed recruits and the handful of local tirones, but the veterans knew its purpose

as there was no river close enough for the procedure they knew was about to take place. Strong Macedonian men had manhandled, rolled, and levered this heavy stone sarcophagus into position, and its sides were over three feet tall. The big trough was now brimmed full of cold, long carried water, and it was easily seven foot long and perhaps four wide. The multitude of soggy, dimpled footprints around it and all heading east attested to the labour it took the auxiliaries with leather buckets to and from the spring to fill it, but this was merely an irritation to the primus pilus; the senior centurion of the 1st cohort of Legio X and the officer who had ordered it done. This prime centurion was the champion and commander of the first and prime cohort of Caesar's glorious 10th. This celebrated man made his stunning appearance then through the entrance to Caesar's reception pavilion, drawing every eye on this parade ground. He was joined in this bright morning sunshine by the equally resplendent primus pilus of the 7th, and these two indomitable warriors stood guard as a pair of slaves pulled back the two flaps of the great tent behind them. The slaves tied them back neatly before vanishing, there revealing the general in his stout campaign chair, dressed in his favourite toga and breastplate and with one hand resting on the enormous head of his surviving German boarhound. Behind and around the general were arrayed his general staff on sumptuous couches, among which reclined Marcus Aemilius Lepidus to Caesar's left; Legate and commanding officer of Legio VII. Behind him stood his subordinate; Gnaeus Domitus Calvinus, the Senior Tribune and 2nd in command of the 7th. To Caesar's righthand reposed Legate Titus Labienus; Senior Tribune and commander of the remaining garrison on Caesar's departure. This tall, Patrician officer was subordinate only to his old friend General Caesar, and behind this legendary Roman officer, known as the scourge of the Atrebates and the Trevirii tribes of Gaul stood the Tenth's Quaestor; Quintus Cassius Longinus, who would once again command the cavalry fleet. There was too another person in this extended group of aristocrats, standing behind the general and to his right alongside Longinus. This man looked completely different to all around him and he seemed to exude a natural

authority, and a bold but foreign fearlessness. Although he wore the clothes of a Roman, he was tall and regal with dark but greying hair worn in a long plait down his back. His big, craggy face of immense character bore the bristling and drooping moustaches of the long-haired Gaul, and a stunning gold torc glinted around his neck confirming both his ethnicity and his status. This was the infamous King Commios of the Prittanic Atrebates and whom Caesar had made king over the nearby conquered sister tribe of the same name. His rule had since last year been allowed to spread over the Môrini tribe and these lands they now occupied to much complaint. His presence was superficial at best, but Caesar had plans for him before he landed on Prittanian's shores again, as this king would end his exile and return to his tribe in the service of Rome once more. King Commios had already been busy stirring up rebellion against his nemesis Cassivellaunus, conversing with his 'Atrebates over the channel' for many months on Caesar's behalf, and the general had invested a small part of his longer-term hopes in this Belgic king, that he will have a great and desirable influence on his related Prittanic tribe *before* he lands this time. He is also hoped to have a persuasive influence on the other Belgic tribes of southern Prittanian once they consolidate their position after landing, a number of which had secretly allied to his banner in his first invasion and were busy with their own preparations for his return. The general seemed relaxed and almost disinterested at this morning's proceedings, and he laid a calm hand back on the big black head of Negrus Primo but sat up nonetheless when the guilty party was marched up the praetorium to face him and his own doom. The *primus pilli* of these two assembled legions took up position in front of each of these large, triangular flaps of Caesar's tent and stood smartly to 'intente' there. Their transverse helmet crests bristled in the morning sunshine, glancing light off these fabulous helmets and metal greaves, their polished breastplates and the *phalerae* hung around their necks glittering in tribute. These round metal discs, worn with great pride were always gleaming as they were awarded for courage and were the envy of their men. Each impressive *primus pilli* bore a magnificent gladius with a white contoured grip, which unlike the

legionaries' blades were worn on their left hips as was required by all Roman officers. Both wore a coveted gold torque on their left wrists and were known to each possess a bagful of similar trophies and awards. These two indomitable men were the pride of both legions, and their attitude and demeanour acknowledged this with a fierce pride as their positions were incredibly hard-won and invariably short-lived. The powerful looking Primus Pili Falcus of Legio VII took several measured paces forward, as he had been appointed acting '*praefectus castrorum*' for today's proceedings, and Falcus was considered camp prefect '*ad spem ordinis*' as it was a post he was pursuing on a more permanent basis. This vastly experienced veteran of so many battles looked magnificent in his immaculately polished armour, and the many decorations he had been awarded in his long service dazzled, from the bronze armillae around his muscular forearms to the gleaming phalerae and the bronze torque which burdened his powerful neck. Most looked next at the smaller, solid gold version on his wrist and which jewel caught the sunlight this bright morning. All these overt symbols of his fearsome abilities almost outnumbered the scars that marred his brutal face, all of which spoke clearly of those same battles he had fought through to victory as he marched forward now with a fine and thoughtless form. They all bespoke this man's undeniable prowess in the ancient art of warfare and were vivid proof if any were required of Falcus' innate ability to survive the same. This acting camp prefect was the conductor of this early morning's ceremony, and his terrifying visage broke into a hateful sneer as the prisoner was brought before him. His cold, hard eyes surveyed Manius hatefully as if he were a louse he had just found in his bedroll. When the beardless and painfully thin Manius was finally able to tear his awestruck eyes from the great general and his officers in that huge open pavilion, he caught sight of Falcus' face and the overt hatred blazing at him, and he paled at the sight. Falcus then turned on his heel in insult and to face Caesar's pavilion once more, standing to *intente* before saluting smartly. This was the signal for the two optio principalii, and they brought Manius up toward his place of punishment, and their prisoner frowned at

the sight of this long stone horse trough before him, wondering at its relevance. Then Manius' eyes fell on a long but shallow timber box which lay on the ground nearby. Innocuous at first glance, this long box about a foot wide had a long panel of fine mesh let into the woodwork, and a large hessian sack had been draped casually over this flat container. His heart lurched painfully in his chest then and as these innocent looking items colluded to paint a vivid picture of what horror awaited him. It dawned on Manius then like a prophetic, cold, and terrifying deluge of freezing water the form and manner of his chosen punishment, and the blood fell from his face. Manius realised with a sudden and hair-raising shock that this was far beyond any swift execution he had ever considered, and he faced his own stark and terrible demise in the face at that electrifying moment. A bone white Manius was suddenly possessed by a far more urgent and powerful fear than his one of the seas, and he was galvanised now into frantic movement. He began wailing in terror, his feet trying without thought to propel him backwards and away from this unbearable and inconceivable judgement. The grip of the optios was unshakeable however, and all his feet managed to achieve were two small clouds of dust and alternate drag marks on the ground behind him as he was dragged inexorably forward to his doom.

Caesar and his military staff relaxed and picked their choice from the plump bunches of freshly picked local grapes and berries, all laid out within reach in deep silver dishes, and several slaves were in nervous and lively attendance. A superb Caecuban wine brought from Rome was enjoyed from charming and delicate glassware, and all looked on with the jaded and hard eyes of the merciless Roman noble. As this pair of muscular tesserarii dragged Manius before the sight of Caesar, the general made an almost imperceptible nod to Falcus, who saluted in response and about turned once more to face the condemned man. This prime-centurion nodded then to his two tough looking officers tasked to carry out the punishment, and they turned and nodded in turn to their two senior optios. These powerful men reaffirmed their grip on the struggling and gibbering Manius who seemed to have lost his wits as his fate became

clear and immediate, and he raved broken, panic-stricken sentences as these powerful officers dragged him forwards to his doom. Saliva flew from his lips without thought whilst his wildly animated feet still thrummed the ground in a pointless rhythm of protest and denial. These two seasoned soldiers did not even blink when the dancing Manius' hot urine splashed their bare legs, and they held him firm and without expression as their centurions bent to prepare the items on the trampled and muddy earth before them. One opened the big hessian bag on the ground and the other carefully slid one end of the wide and long wooden box into its gaping mouth. He seemed to pull some kind of catch or latch on the bagged end of this box before upending it carefully, shaking out the contents into this strong sack as his partner held it open. Manius needed no sight of those slithering contents to know that they were living, venomous things of nightmare, and he was certain now exactly what awaited him in this bag as the belly of it moved menacingly and horribly. Manius screamed again hysterically, kicking his feet frantically now as the two big centurions moved in to grab his wiry, urine streaked and flailing legs. His struggles gained him nothing as these experienced soldiers lashed his feet together in an instant between them, and together, these four big officers managed to manipulate the naked and screaming Manius into this bag. The two centurions quickly lifted it with ease, and their colleagues lashed the gathered neck tightly closed with a length of strong leather, sealing Manius' fate. The sack now burst into life as Manius was introduced to his fate. Unseen by those who watched, he thrashed around inside it, howling, and screaming terribly as he was mauled and bitten repeatedly by the captive and equally terrified serpents within. Expressionless, the two optios lifted this living, thrashing bag onto the edge of the huge water trough and let the screaming, squirming bundle fall into the cold water, which slopped over the rim with a big splash. This frantically moving bag sank immediately below the surface until the trapped air inside lent it buoyancy, causing it bob up again, and the screeching became loud and stark once more. As water began to seep into this dusty bag the thrashing became even wilder along with the

piteous screaming, and water began to slop over the stone sides as Manius thrashed within this coffin's stone constraints, savaged by the dozen or so frantic and drowning snakes he now shared his bag of execution with. As bubbles streamed from countless places in the hessian, the two unyielding centurions used the Macedonian's long poles to push the writhing and hideously bucking bag under the surface again. Although the harrowing screaming of Manius was muted by the water, everyone watching could tell that the punishment was still ongoing and terrible, as the violent kicking and the man's desperate but useless struggles for life were transmitted up those two poles, which jumped and bucked wildly as the centurions lent their weight to them. It took several more minutes before the commotion in the water trough lessened and the wooden poles eventually stopped their jumping to become calm, and a few minutes longer before the large leather flaps of Caesar's tent were dropped back into place.

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The death of King Bryn ap Terfel of the Decawangly came as a great shock to his gŵyr and to his werrin as they had thought him in rude health, but his great heart had given out following one tremendous feast at CaerLeb, and Decawangly's throne had fallen empty. Leaving no heir, King Bryn's ashes were interred in all due honour and ceremony, which was outdone thirty days later by the great wedding at the dead king's capital, built high above the MaerDref of Brynsiencin and in that ancient territory known as *Royal* Llanidan. The ruler of the *mountain-eagle* tribe of Môn did leave a very beautiful daughter however, and her marriage to King Guerthaeth of Gangania bound these neighbouring and peaceful warriors of the *raven-head* and the *mountain-eagle* together, forever. King Guerthaeth ruled all Gangania from his towering triple stronghold of CaerCewry; the high and palisaded fortress atop the Ganganian isthmus' granite heart. CaerCewry soared above all at a dizzying height of fifteen hundred feet, and it was known throughout Khumry and Prydein as the *fortress of the giants*. Guerthaeth although came from a long line of these giants of men he

stood only a hair over five feet tall in his riding boots. He made a striking appearance nonetheless, when he married Princess Meirwen ferch Bryn of the Decawangly and merged both tribes into one great kingdom, which in eternal honour to his nain Guerthaeth called Fenedotia-Gwen. As a patriotic gesture following his coronation and the *fasting* of their bodies, King Guerthaeth of Fenedotia-Gwen had gathered his host and had left Meirwen his new wife, beginning the long and tortuous journey to Lloegr, the south coast of Prydein and ultimately the kingdom of Caint.

Guerthaeth and all his brave warriors had made a blood oath; a sword sworn declaration to their Gods in the sacred defence of the nation itself, as the world and his wife knows that the *Yellow Dog of Rome* is once again on her very doorstep. Unfettered by the hotly controversial 'northern exclusion' and regardless of the unpopular and arrogant southern king's hubris in this regard, Guerthaeth had felt compelled to act and to join this national defence on the south coast, and he would do this under the white flags of his fledgling kingdom. Despite the monumental undertaking it represented to these provincial but deeply religious people of sacred Môn, it was seen as nothing short of a spiritual obligation. Brave King Guerthaeth led six hundred of his doughty spearmen and women from Gogledd Khumry south, to help the southern king repel the Roman rogue once more when he eventually arrives. Caswallawn's veins ran red and hot with the same Khumric blood as Guerthaeth's and all his valiant people's, and with that southern king being a son of the great Beli Mawr himself, they saw it as a sacred and unavoidable duty to hazard their lives in support of one of the infamous *Red Ravagers* of Prydein and a son of Khumry herself.

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The ceremony had started a full hour before midnight, when the druids had heaved an oversized gold torc into these blessed waters with a loud '*futumpsh*' sound, obliterating the myriad stars on the reflected beauty of its surface for many long minutes. That cabal of druids had then led the incantations and the sacred rites, and every person present had brought

something of personal value to this holy service. These brooches, hairpins, mirrors, bangles, swords, daggers and all manner of tools and other useful items these people had brought with them had all been bent or broken. This was to signify that their use in this world was at an end before they were then cast into the black waters of this shallow lake as votive offering to their Gods, each accompanied by a solemn prayer. With confirmation of the might of Rome sailing north once more to these shores this very day and its unwelcome advent imminent, this sombre ceremony had been carried out earnestly in secluded groves and idylls across this country. That had been six hours ago, and these southern lands seemed more peaceful than ever this portentous day, but all knew that this was just the deceptive calm before a great and cataclysmic, *foreign* storm arrived from the south and from over the great channel.

As the lord of night finally retired, the pale rays of a breaking sunrise pierced the gloom. They illuminated the eastern heavens in a glorious, mimosa fan thrown up against the dying stygian purple. This warm new light picked out the tall shapes of trees, and large stands of alder, willow, oak and birch which fringed and guarded this broad and marshy mere were all gradually revealed in this emerging light. This was a secluded idyll where druids and nobles had gathered hours ago for a primordial and crucial procedure, but they were all gone now, entirely missing this spectacular moment on this brand-new and misty morning. As the thudding tempo of the last horse's hooves had faded, the silence which descended on this beautiful hollow had lasted but a moment before the air had been filled once more with the sounds of re-emerging and reawakening nature. A long and very old timber pier stretched out across this modest lake which lay at the heart of this marshy hollow, but it vanished into the low mist which still clung to its surface and around the rows of its dark timber legs. Ghostly tendrils swirled around these stout supports and the tall, slender stalks of the surrounding reeds and bulrushes, which together gave this small grove a spiritual aspect which could not be overlooked. These sentinel stands of bulrushes were supported by tussocks of wild grass and were flanked by tall, reaching

growths of the spiky-stemmed milk thistle only recently topped by their alarmingly purple flowers. A chorus of lively frogs put out a barrage of competitive croaking across these reed beds, whilst a large and lazy carp slapped the hidden surface somewhere with a broad tail. It scattered an extended family of skating water boatmen with a subtle splash, issuing rings of concentric and softly expanding circles almost unseen under this clinging mist. The wooden pier reaching out to the heart of this lake looked positively ancient and had clearly undergone many repairs over the years, fresh and recent timber showing bright where the latest of these repairs had been made, mostly on the walkway underfoot as those planks were always the quickest to rot away. This long and narrow jetty had been thronged with people a little over six hours previously for their votive offering and when the night sky above them had been awash with a billion brilliant stars, but now its ancient timbers were softened and draped by the first of Bel's warming yellow rays.

Nature's mist had rolled back this last hour, but swirling wisps still clung to the dappled surface of this petal strewn water which drifted around these protective tussocks of grass and reeds like ghostly fingers. A truly ancient bank and ditch system divided the eastern approach to this spirit familiar, whispering mere, and the low shadows among them began to slant away now as this small, bog shrouded lake materialised and took form in Bel's growing light. The long and low, grassy hill behind these ancient and softly rounded banks, their shallow ditches and all the surrounding humps and bumps were festooned with a profusion of flaming colour now as Bel rose gracefully from the east. The vivid palette of this beautiful glade came to life in *His* growing light, and it was bejewelled now by the fiery red catkins of bog myrtle which were everywhere and which are loved for their medicinal oil by the healers of this country. These blazing crimson spots of bog the myrtle competed gamely with the vivid purple blades of tall autumn crocuses towering over them, and they strived for as much glory and sunlight among these colourful stalwarts as the myriad flora in this sylvan oasis. Milk-thistles and tall purple crocuses grew all around this little lake alongside prodigious banks of sunshine-

yellow broom. These fought for survival among colourful gatherings of spearwort and bedstraw, all of which loved the moisture laden ground here and grew with a wild abandon. Here and there peeked the shocking pink petals of ragged robin which caught the eye and were in their prime compared to the fading, spiky white flowers of the bean bog which were almost done for this summer. Bright green fingers of glasswort had sprouted among the bean bog in short clusters, and the air was redolent with a fragrant cocktail of heady aromas from these glossy green digits including the effusive bog myrtle. This was pleasingly infused with an enticing scent of apple mint, which interspersed these squat bushes of red goosefoot with their tiny flowers of flame. All of which elevated this quietly awakening lakeside glade into an earthly paradise, blessed too now with the first glorious birdsong of the day. A light, westerly breeze arrived with this musical dawn, ghosting across the rippling waters of this beautiful lake and animating the mist which still clung to its sacred boundary between the living and the dead. Abruptly, the rising sun beamed down obliquely from a low blue patch of clear eastern sky, illuminating the adjacent and sacred druid's circle, marked out with crystalline white quartz stones and which sparkled now in tribute to Bel. This druid's circle had been drawn a few reeds from the beginning of the pier and commanding the crown of this holy ground, but the spiritual porthole at its heart was now closed, as the ancient stone altar of the druids was gone along with all the people. Last night's prayers, the sacrifices and the long vigil had all ended. The priests and their guests had recovered and departed, and the Gods seemed pleased as Bel rose now in a graceful arc, curving into the beautiful blue heavens above. *His* enervating warmth prompted another joyful chorus from the delighted frogs, and this flat expanse of still and sun dappled water, now clear of the clinging mist perfectly reflected the tranquillity of the exquisite blue sky above it. Only the Gods knew whether the earlier sacrifices and the hundreds of votive offerings had pleased them enough to intervene and to bring the storm these Prydeinig people so desperately needed again to destroy the approaching Roman fleet. 'Will this delightful mere in southern Prydein,

sanctified and blessed this day in their names still be so untouched and pleasing to the eye in a few days' time? Or will it be consumed by the destructive wrath of Julius Caesar and his barbarous shock troops in the coming invasion?' Only *They* knew.



Chapter Five.

“LAND!”

The loud call coming from the topmost masthead took Caesar by surprise. Looking to where this wildly gesticulating man was pointing, he could see the sun glinting off those familiar yet distant white cliffs again for himself, and this voyage seemed to have simply flown by. He could not equate the interminable ordeal of last year’s crossing with this enjoyable trip, as this short and uneventful journey, propelled by steady and favourable tradewinds had been nothing short of plain sailing.

Following the long-established set of standing orders, his captains steered this fleet east and much sooner this time, long before they approached the glimmering, oyster shell bulwark of Kantion’s cliffs. The Prittans were arrayed all over that headland and above the pebble beach which had witnessed so much bloodshed during his failed previous invasion, and Caesar spat over the side at the sight of it. The Prittans did very much the same now at his return, tearing along those cliffs in pursuit, but he drew far ahead of them, sailing the fleet much further east and on this occasion with an obliging tide. Soon, the broad estuary he had looked down upon from those cliffs last year opened out to their left and Caesar made a signal to his captain, confirming his intentions. The fleet steered inland abruptly and entered this wide estuary, making directly for the wide expanse of a sandy beach curving along the northeastern shore. A few small islets braved the flow and Caesar could see the outflows of two great rivers entering this estuary from the west and behind those beleaguered islands. The first of these confluences led up to the Prittans’ mean river harbour of *Rutupia*, which he had considered last year as a suitable landing place, however, with the benefit of hindsight it was deemed too risky and subject to possible ambush. Should the fleet need

to turn and repair out to sea suddenly, it would prove fraught in that riverine harbour, and so an open beach and these massively customised ships had been the agreed format for landing these invasion troops here, aided in no small way by the detailed reports of previous reconnaissance and from the experiences of last year. The shallower but broader draught of these ships would also be ideal for transporting a great deal of loot back to Gaul at invasion's end, and when southern Prittanica was on its knees and in flames. This long crescent of sandy beach in the nearing distance was studded with warriors, but at a rough estimate, this defensive force numbered no more than four or five hundred men, and Caesar grinned, looking back to his west. The huge host of Prittanica warriors who had gathered on the cliffs to receive him had a long way to catch up, and by their dust clouds were still negotiating this cracked and fractured coastline toward him. They looked to be circumventing Rutupia to take the valley which funnelled their river *Griffstour* into the rushing brine of this channel estuary. As more and more of his fleet approached the mouth of this estuary around his flagship, they must have obliterated the complete horizon from those warriors, and Caesar's smile broadened as he saw them break formation and withdraw from the beach.

This battle landing plan had been well established, and all his officers were intimate with its main points, but it seems their highly detailed and much drilled beach assault phase had been unnecessary as apart from a few distant groups of sullen onlookers, the beach ahead was deserted. As the ramps of the first ten ships boomed to the surf at the waterline, Caesar was content that his second invasion of Prydain had landed unopposed. His pulse quickened at the sight of his cavalry pounding down those great timber ramps to take the beach, and he stirred himself, heading for the rail as his flagship entered the shallows.

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Caesar's landing was unopposed for some very good reasons, as Caswallawn had seen the vast size of this fleet and realised quickly that any defensive force he sent to the beach to oppose it could be swiftly

flanked by other ships landing subsequently to either side of this bay and his men easily destroyed. As he watched the Romans consolidate their beach landing, Caswallawn was content to assemble his army further north for the planned mass-attack the following day, and so he and his Brythons melted away into the trees.

The main body of Caswallawn's spearmen were still assembling in the broad maes which made up last year's allied war camp, and those coming east from the cliffs were still to arrive. News had arrived before them angering Caswallawn beyond measure, as it transpired the Belgic tribes which had already shown so much dissent had headed '*west*', taking themselves home and would not be taking part. This did not do a great deal for the tenuous unity of Caswallawn's disparate troops, widening the gulf between the allied rebels once more, and many arguments and brawls had broken out in all the southern war camps. Caswallawn had worn himself thin touring these very different and far-flung campsites to reassure his troops, doing his utmost to keep this fragile alliance of extended families together long enough for him to achieve his goals. Taking Caswallawn and all the Brythons by complete surprise however, Caesar struck out that very night and headed up Cwm Gryffdŵr, heading for CaerCelgwern or CaerCant no doubt, leaving the Brythons to hurriedly break camp and to pursue him in the dark.

As dawn broke the following morning, Caswallawn and his host had used more direct routes and had overtaken the Romans this last hour. Hundreds of chariots loaded down with troops had been ferried west through winding forest lanes, and a large part of Caswallawn's army had reached CaerCelgwern just in time. He had his breathless troops array themselves all along the eastern bank of the Gryffdŵr to slow the Roman's progress into eastern Caint, just as the harsh roman horns announced the general's arrival. Forcing Caesar to fight all along the banks of this river, Caswallawn was hoping to allow the soldiers of CaerCelgwern the time to reinforce the entrance to the fortress and to block the routes through the

ditches with trees, already felled and whose branches had all been sharpened and spiked with iron nails in preparation.

As the morning sweated painfully past midday, Caswallawn's Brythons had put up a tremendous fight, but this was never planned as a decisive battle in any way, just another time-consuming hurdle for Caesar to cross, losing men continually. The river crossing was made so difficult and dangerous, the Romans struggled for over four hours to gain the furthest side in numbers which could hold and be consolidated before another mad rush of defending warriors cleared them from the torn and bloodied, eastern riverbank. Caesar had exercised great foresight however, as when his Gallic cavalry eventually reappeared they were the other side of the Gryffdwŵr. He had sent them looping inland in search of a ford upriver and they had clearly been successful, as they hugged the trees along the far bank in their return and to negate the attention of Caswallawn's chariots and his archers. Then Caesar's excellent cavalry tore into the Brythonic flanks from those trees over the water and with an incisive attack. The Brythons suffered horribly from this surprise confrontation and were completely routed from the opposite approaches of this river, withdrawing to a distant call from a horn. The torn and battered survivors just melted away into the nearby trees, just as the wet legionaries clambered up out of the river to fight them. The abandoned riverbank they had conquered was littered now with Brythonic dead, and the flow it constrained was filled with the slowly moving bodies of both nations, all heading inexorably seaward. Far fewer were clothed in the maroon wool and polished armour of Rome however, and so these murderous invaders crossed into eastern Caint, boisterous in their victory. The mounted Gallic auxiliaries who had caused such deadly mayhem among the ranks of the Brythons, and who had claimed so many lives along the banks of this river were deeply hated by the Brythons for being treacherous *combrogi*, and the allied brigades of archers sought them out eagerly as their comrades vanished up into the woods behind them. The hillsides of CaerCelgwern were festooned with trees unusually, as most boundary or *watch* hillforts are cleared so that the military might of the fortress on its crown could be seen for miles.

Even the walls were often whitewashed for *enemy-facing* boundary strongholds especially the capitals of each tribe, which would gleam proud atop a denuded hill for all to see and to fear. The trees at this watch and *fighting* fortress were left to grow deliberately, as they were added protection against mounted warriors and made a confusing viewpoint for an approaching enemy, giving no appreciation of the fortress hidden at its peak. The locals also knew every track and lane in this conical forest, having trapped it and the surrounding forests all their lives. In a *hunter*, hit-and-run style defence of this hill and the fort on its crown, these trees would prove invaluable as the paths and trackways through them were everywhere and utterly unfamiliar to these encroaching Romans.

Once the way was clear, the legionaries forded the Gryffdwŵr and crossed the boundary into eastern Caint, and the Brythons watched them advance using the cover of the trees. The alliance of southern archers assembled at the fringes and at foot of this hill began firing at the advancing enemy as their comrades finished the blockades to the main route behind them. Pairs of horses were used to drag those great spiked trees across the main pathway leading to the caer above, and the hillside was fraught with this frantic activity. The disparate but highly colourful brigades of allied archers at the periphery, bolstered by many of the finest bowmen from Khumry and Seganta held back the approaching Romans as Caswallawn reassembled his army behind and to the north of the fort. From the Brythons' perspective, a long line of nobles and aristocrats could be seen winding their way down the rear northern lane, leading their children and three ox carts loaded with their belongings, and a small herd of cattle followed them downhill in the dust. Apart from a token line of warriors on the western battlements CaerCelgwern had become all but abandoned, but none of this could be seen by their enemy. Despite Caesar's bold and surprising first night manoeuvres, King Cyngetoric's nephew Gŵyr Elwyn ap Uned and his family had managed to escape with all they held dear.

The Romans surged from the river toward Bryn Celgwern but had to shelter under their turtle shell formation twice from the withering

onslaught from the trees. As the roaring legionaries drew near to the fringes and tried to bring the Brythons to battle, the archers and slingers withdrew. They rotated their lines uphill and flitted away through the myriad trunks of these dense firs like squirrels to reassemble behind the next line of their awaiting combrogi. More rows of archers were drawn higher up behind them to cover their comrades on their uphill retreat, keeping up a barrage of arrows and slingstones to fall on these invaders. The Romans notoriously do not know how to quit however, and so, in the face of this onslaught of shot and barb they bravely poured uphill and into these woods. At the blare of a horn, the Romans broke their rigid formations and charged up the hill as a roaring mass of flashing steel and red wool, rushing upwards between these trees in small groups and slaughtering any Brython they caught. With the most determined effort and showing inspirational courage, they pushed ever upwards but losing men to arrows and stones continually. Showing their superb training, these Roman legionaries used their scutum and their long-honed battle tactics to cover each other, using the trees themselves for protection against these whistling arrows and buzzing stones and forging ever onwards without check as they had done across all Gallia. With glimmering centurions and furious optios screaming at their men, they fought uphill in skilled groups and between these trees, overwhelming the slower groups of archers and their protective spearmen, eventually scattering the opposition completely. Arriving at the first barricade of felled trees, the vanguard of these Romans roared their victory and began to spread out as more and more of their comrades charged up this wooded hill to join them. The gŵyr and the more heavily armoured soldiers of the caer had melted away from the battlements and had left by the same servant's gate at the northeastern wall, following their lord, his lady and their children into the valley at the back of this hill. This rear entrance was well hidden among the trees outside this fort, and the steep and narrow pathway leading downhill and away from it was concealed by a deep ravine. This steep gully concealed this escaping family and their warriors until they were almost reunited with the main body of

Caswallawn's hidden army on the plain below. The more nimble, lightly armoured spearmen, the archers, and the slingers remained at the palisades to continue the bombardment of Caesar's 7th Legion as they prepared to storm the front entrance of their caer. The Romans' auxiliaries were ordered to cut branches down and to fill the outer ditches with these and dozens of large shrubs so that they could pass safely over them, and the hill became furious, peppered with the sounds of knocking axes and cursing soldiers.

Less than an hour later, a heavily armoured Roman vanguard with their comrade's scutum held over their heads stepped out and began to advance up this blockaded road. They pulled down the first great pile of spiky logs before them to gain access to the fortress ramp itself, but under a constant barrage from above. As these big men up front pulled at these stacked tree trunks with iron hooks and long chains, their comrades had to form their own *testudo* over the heads of these powerful men as they furiously but inexorably cleared these blockages. With the last of these dangerously spiked trees removed they neared the great gatehouse of this fort. The blistering shot began to peter out from the battlements above and to either side of it as the final blockage was dragged away.

Smoke was seen rising from inside, and so these big men and their big axes brought down the front gates in a flurry of furious action. As this afternoon clouded over, the fortress fell, but as the huge axe wielding vanguard crashed through the sundered gates and into the bare and littered interior, they found it virtually abandoned as the Brythons were long gone. The archers and the slingers had swiftly followed the departing spear and swordsmen, firing the fortress behind them. The only living thing remaining was a scrawny mongrel, who paused in his furious scratching on the dust of this deserted parade ground. He gave the Romans a disdainful look before rising and jogging off with his tail wagging. He vanished around the back of the thatched and empty forge just as it burst violently into flames.

As his men battled the fires and others pointlessly searched this empty shell for any loot, Caesar could see that the Prittans had disappeared into the surrounding forest to the north, clearly making their escape from a rear gate before their fort was taken. A deep gorge ran all the way downhill from this gated rear entrance and into the dense trees surrounding this glade making an excellent escape route, something he would look out for in future. As the day was almost done, he feared ambush in the dark and so decided not to chase them, preferring to secure what was left of this fort on this successful first night of manoeuvres.

The following morning and in a fine and expansive mood, Caesar assembled his men and had them form up in three columns of mixed infantry and cavalry at the foot of this wooded hill. Leaving a garrison around the vanquished and burned-out fort on its crown, he led his army along the main drover's road to the north with a keen sense of anticipation. Within the hour he found the Prittans, and they were amassed and awaiting him on a broad and grassy hillside. A cacophonous explosion of noise greeted his arrival, with drums hammering and tall bronze horns lowing, adding to the raw sound of this cheering enemy multitude. The loud calling of his centurions competed lustily with this racket, calling for their legionaries to form up for the attack, and Caesar watched relaxed from his saddle, confident of his *customary* success in this second battle with these uncivilised barbarians, and one which he hoped would prove decisive. Just as he was about to give the order to attack, a dispatch rider arrived with urgent and grave news from the coast. The news this rider had brought in such haste came from Quintus Atrius; the officer Caesar had left in charge of the beachhead. His news was the bad kind, and the kind Caesar had feared for over a year. The storm they had watched from afar the previous night had passed out to sea in the dark hours, but what they had not seen, was that the storm had roared directly over their landing site and had left the beachhead in an uproar. Many of his ships had been damaged in the sudden maelstrom, forcing Atrius to send news to the general by way of this .

Caesar's officers fell silent around him as they knew well the pale and strained look on his face at this news, and their general's infamous anger was dangerous as he digested this dreadful information. The expected explosion of curses toward the Prittanic weather Gods never came however, and Caesar just accepted the circumstance for what it was. Ignoring the clashing of arms, the chaos, and the raucous bellowing of the Prittanic host challenging him, he spat to the ground and gave his orders. The general's neck was red as he led his men away from this fight and back toward the coast, the indecipherable insults and ridicule of those Prittans burning his insides, but he had no choice. This was just a raiding party for his own amusement, and with the bulk of his armed forces still on that beach, he had to return quickly and take charge of the situation as it was time to get serious. Returning to the foot of that wooded and conical hill with its enduring column of sky-reaching and dense black smoke, he called down the garrison, and then Caesar led his men back across the river, heading for the coast and his weather besieged beachhead. To the report, over forty of his ships had been damaged in that overnight storm, and Caesar feared that another bigger storm could wreck all his plans. He had the hard-earned experience to know that he had to draw his fleet up onto shore and to berth it properly for its full protection.

Following a survey of the whole estuary and a tactical meeting with Quintus Atrius and his other officers, Caesar decided to accept Mamurra's judgement and his unrivalled opinion. This meant building a great fortified enclosure on this landing beach if the fleet was to be protected properly, and so Caesar set that senior officer to the task. Marcus Vitruvius Mamurra, known just as Mamurra by his fellow officers and throughout the Roman world was by far the best and most ingenious engineer in the Roman army, and Caesar regarded the man as indispensable. His bridge and fort building capabilities were legendary, especially in times of war, and although he was a known stickler for detail and demanded total obedience, he had a celebrated ability to get the absolute best out of the immunes in any Fabrum he oversaw. Once Mamurra and his senior

engineers had made a detailed survey of the proposed site, he gave Caesar his expert judgement, and Caesar had cursed roundly at the delay of almost two weeks required by Mamurra to build his fortress. He had come sooner this year specifically to avoid the storms which had assaulted him so badly the year before, and he was furious now, as he could have been here a month sooner if those uncommon storms in Gaul had not held him back so cruelly. Regardless of the time it would take along with all the resources and manpower needed, Caesar ordered Mamurra to start building his proposed structure immediately.

Just back from the shoreline of this curving bay, Mamurra and his immunes erected an unusually circular fort for a Roman structure and with two flared legs. Looking perhaps like a huge keyhole from a bird's perspective, Mamurra's round fortress had been cleverly designed for an anticipated 360-degree range of defence and to conform to the land under it, and it took him and his engineers an amazing ten days to complete. This uneven and largely circular, *Alesian* type of walled enclosure was surrounded by a deep and fearsome double ditch system which had been dug and reinforced in record time, and the extended legs of this ditch and bank system reached beyond the impressive entrance, flaring outwards and down to the shoreline and to the sea, and it protected the whole fleet. Even with Mamurra's time saving feat of stunning engineering, these ten days of construction had been used wisely by the rest of this invasion force and throughout the whole fleet. They had used this time to repair all the rigging damaged by the storm and to make further repairs to the men's kit, and the artillery pieces too all required maintenance. More importantly soldiers needed to be kept busy.

Caesar had to laugh at Mamurra's creativity, as the landward approach to the gatehouse to his new fortress on this beach was flanked by a row of severed and post-mounted enemy heads, all rotting slowly under the sun. A long row of timber crosses had been erected by Mamurra and his men on the golden sands of this beach, and that legendary Roman officer was letting the barbarian locals know that the initial period of reconnaissance

was over, and that his general meant business from now on. Now it was the time for war, the all-out Roman style of war. All the remaining hostages and captured prisoners were dragged out and crucified on those crosses, in a long row and all along this beach so that the watching Prittans could witness from the trees the punitive power of Rome should they continue to oppose it. The conqueror of all Gaul had come here for revenge, tribute, treasure, and for hostages, but most of all Caesar had come here for all the kings of this land to bend the knee to him this time and ultimately to Rome, becoming vassals to the greatest federation on this earth. Watching his soldiers hammer iron nails into the limbs of these squirming and screaming barbarian animals Caesar looked pleased, as he had determined to march toward the river Tamesa tomorrow and to conquer the 'unconquerable' Lud's Dun at its throat. Once that was reduced to rubble, he would push on east into Trinovanta leaving behind him much more of the same as he had a long-awaited and keenly anticipated meeting with one duplicitous King Avarway to bring about.



Chapter Six.

Cwm Creigiog was slowly drawing into line with the southern states, in that it began to look as if summer was in fact going to show up this year. Regardless of the month, Ederus was glad of the dark and double knitted hooded cloak his ghost-warriors used, as it was not only perfect for the hunt it was also warm, and it had kept him warm all night. He, Galan, Berwyn and Galwyn led the royal hunt this cold and crisp morning, following a warm and comfortable night on this steep hill and in 'Eirwen's cave'.

Ederus had stood at the head of an extremely royal party the previous evening, where all had stood nodding and talking quietly about those dark bloodstains on the wall of this big cave and which still remained as enduring evidence of his daughter's ferocious spirit. That sobering interlude had been a short one however, as these gregarious northern men had laughed uproariously into the night, aided in no small way by the comedy of King Berwyn and a fair quantity of his *medd-tanllyd* as the Damnoniau called their honey-liquor. It was young Berwyn who had supplied this 'fiery mead' all evening and much of the humour. As their chosen men and their servants had bedded down under the stars outside and at the foot of this hill, a fine evening of *bones* around a roaring fire had been enjoyed by these familiar noblemen. Relaxing comfortably within this hillside grotto, Galwyn and Galan had sat alongside each other by the fire, playing bones throughout Berwyn's hilarious storytelling, and it had been a memorable night. The ancient constellations drawn on the ceiling of *Eirwen's Cave* had looked down on them all while their sticklike ancestors and the long-vanished prey they hunted around these rough walls were once again entertained by regal and companionable Brythons. Ederus had been immensely pleased at the concord and the clear friendship shown between his two eastern and western vassals, although

Galwyn did seem to look up to Galan somewhat as he had known and had admired him since childhood. Galwyn did however beat his senior regularly at bones, and Galan's annoyance was entertaining at each event. These two kings had battled it out on the board of life until the early hours, and their victorious laughter or their groans of defeat had endeared them both to Ederus, and it bode well for his Federation. His two preoccupied vassals whilst geographically divided by his own huge central kingdom were separated too by their own proud lineages and increasingly by the politicised religion of these northern territories of late. Although declared dire enemy on the bone board before them, Ederus was gratified by the obvious unity and amity between them and that the two had clearly become firm friends.

Once they had all been awoken by the alluring aromas of the refreshments brought into this cave by the many *arwein* and the fire was coaxed back from the dead by a servant, these sleepy aristocrats stretched themselves into activity. Munching on warm bread squares and sipping deliciously steaming mead, they gazed down from the entrance of this cave and over the fecund river valley below them, expanding away into the milky haze of infinity. Beyond the dew soaked, corralled entrance to this hillside cave and its huge guardian oak, the vibrant green cleft revealed before them in this growing light coursed its way down over the mist peeking tips of countless firs below, and it was as soothing to the eye as the light of this new dawn. As they watched munching happily, Bel's silky sunlight brushed the nascent colours of this cold but glorious new day into life, all the way to the far distant and blood red hills to the east, burning now with Bel's glory as if the world was catching fire. Following a fine break of their fast, these satisfied nobles set out downhill to join their men and women in the small field at the foot of this stony hill, to where their standards were gathered in the ground mist and to where their magnificent horse lines were guarded. As the kings and the senior gŵyrd of allied Galedon mounted their spectacular horses, the dogs were rounded up to much excited yapping and barking from this mixed pack, adding to the expectant nervousness of all the attendant soldiers. Their

army horses were left cropping the lush and wet grass where they stood around this smattering of glistening tents, fetlock deep in this clinging mist. So, their subservient officer owners entered this dense forest before them on foot along with their own men and women, marching behind them and their mounted high king and his lords. This intrepid band of royals headed east along the lively and convoluted river running through the heart this deeply forested valley in high spirits despite the reason for this hunt and the stunning cold. This riverine gorge was flanked by tall and steep cliffs of precarious looking shale, which were somehow able to support these massive fir trees towering over them all as they made their way downhill.

The hounds had yet to pick up the scent of the great bear they pursued this glorious morning, but from the racket they made you would have thought the beast mere reeds away. Ederus pressed their trainers hard however, as the belligerent beast they sought this cold morning had caused havoc in a nearby village. Ederus felt a great responsibility to catch and to kill this animal, as they were *his* werrin at threat from its bold marauding. Cwm Creigiog was deep in the stony heart of Camelon, and so the responsibility fell to him as not only was he king of this ruling family, but he was also high king of all Galedon's tribes and ruler of its great northern Federation. He had dozens of gŵyr and hundreds of senior, hugely capable men to call on of course, and for any emergency imaginable. So, his speech about kingly duty had not cut much butter with his daughter this morning, as she had seen right through his excuse for yet another hunting campaign. In his defence, the massive male bear they hunted had killed a woman and two of her three children, seriously injuring the surviving baby before destroying their family thatch, and as their men were still in the hills tending to their cattle, they had been defenceless. Even their dogs had been no match for the enraged animal, and the whole household had been horribly vulnerable to that huge and fearless bear when it had arrived at Treflan Creigiog looking for food. Ederus had been horrified on hearing the news, promising himself and all those around him that he was going to kill the beast himself. This bear's

plate-sized footprints had led the first scouts of this big hunting party east and to the head of this valley, but those huge footprints in the muddy grass had vanished in the stony ground of Cwm Creigiog. They were a day and a half behind this rogue, human killing bear, and it had rained yesterday, so without one of Albion's unswerving and uncommon *Ai/yr* in their ranks, they had to pin their hopes on one of their own hunter's or a local spotting the beast. Ederus had sent his more mortal trackers out in all directions this morning in the hope of crossing the spoor or finding a kill, or perhaps spotting claw marks on a tree, but their efforts were diluted without even a vague direction to focus on. Until some fortunate soul put eyes on the beast they sought this day and earned the gold coin in his pocket, Ederus played the odds and led his men down to the foot of this valley. There, they crept alongside the righthand bank of this powerful stream which fell through this stony cwm because Ederus knew as every hunter here did; all creatures thirst.

To circumvent a small but vertical plunge of waterfall in Nant Creigiog they were forced to climb and to negotiate a narrow goat track winding its way up the steep hillside to their right, towering over them and this lively river. The track was narrow and twisting, and so the nobles had to let their horses clamber up it one at a time as it snaked its torturous way up to the crown of this valley side. As this stony, meandering pathway neared the crest of the hillside it became treacherous and all the riders had to take great care and to pass one at a time. In this way and in single file, the vanguard breasted the hill and gathered on its forested crown. Relaxed and chatting quietly in this dappled morning sunlight, these aristocrats looked down through these trees as the last of their horses clambered up this steep pathway, and as the rest of their hunting party in a long line of men bent forward at the waist slowly plodded up this twisting shale path behind them.

Ederus was bringing up the rear of this mounted party, and he was absently watching the swaying and glossy white rump of the captivating Lady Galwena ahead of him and as Galan steered her the last few difficult

yards up onto the crown of this perilous, slippery hill. He was utterly fascinated by her, and his thoughts constantly flew back those weeks to when his own glorious steed under him; Caddogddu had mounted her. Both he and Galan had been like expectant parents since that day, awaiting even the slightest sign of her pregnancy with little patience. Without warning, Caddogddu reared up onto his hind legs and began to shuffle backwards toward the crumbling edge, snorting and neighing in alarm. Ederus rose instinctually in the saddle and leaned forward, keeping his balance easily and almost without thought, but the confused alarm was clear on his bearded face, having no idea why his horse had reared up so dangerously.

“Easy boy or you’ll kill us both!” Ederus growled in his stallion’s ear and spurred the horse.

Caddogddu responded instantly, and his massive haunches bulged as he kicked out behind him, searching for enough footing just to clear the top of this incline. His right rear hoof struck out into thin air, whilst his left caught the shale and held. Their combined and sudden weight was just too much for the ragged edge to support however, and Caddogddu’s one trembling hind hoof lost its precarious footing. As he scrambled for grip with both front hooves, the wet shale under them crumbled away completely. This all took place in a blink of time, and Ederus glanced behind him at his stallion’s misstep. He was dismayed to see his remaining great hoof strike out into thin air and in a shower of gravel, causing them both to lurch backwards. Nothing happened then for a long, unbelievable moment and as Ederus held himself upright in the saddle with a grave expression on his face. He could clearly hear Caddogddu’s front hooves scrabbling for frantic purchase and scattering the shale beneath them both, but then abruptly, they were falling. Looking up for one heartbeat, Ederus spotted the tail of a viper as it vanished back under its rock, and his face calmed, the look of shocked doom receding as he fell, relieved perhaps that his beloved horse had not just killed them both for no good reason.

“Ederus!” Galan roared, and he vaulted off Galwena to sprint back down this steep trackway to where Ederus had fallen, but his bone white face bore the stark truth of this shocking situation. The ruling king of all Galedon and a close, personal friend had just fallen to his death before his eyes. He of all people was in a position to know the measure of calamity and disarray this tragedy was about to cast across Ederus’ kingdom, his own kingdom and the greater federation of Galedon, and it showed on his shocked and suddenly haggard face at that horrifying moment. Galwyn got to him just before Galan broached the collapsing edge of this path, and his Fachomagian comrade grabbed his leather belt tightly.

“My lord take care, or you too may perish!” This shocked young Fachomagian king told him with wide eyes and keeping a ferocious grip on the back of Galan’s belt. The king of Epidia nodded, and thus supported by a trusted friend he stepped to the newly and raggedly scalloped, crumbling edge of this cliffside path and leaned out.

With his face a tragic mask as the ramifications of this terrible accident continued to wash over him, Galan was still standing and staring down at the shocking scene beneath him several minutes later, and he was holding on to a tree for more than its security. With thoughts of their quarry this day pushed aside by tragedy, men and women were arriving at the carnage below, and all were pale and subdued. It was clear that man and beast had perished together, and they both lay smashed and broken now in the valley below. It started to sleet then, that hard northern sleet which assaults bare skin like needles of bone, and a vicious wind kicked up behind it, scouring up this valley and chilling all to the core both physically and spiritually. It was clear to all those grieving people below that a great storm was approaching, but their equally devastated lords and ladies on this ridge had a deeper understanding. They knew that the calamities of this day carried a far greater threat than a Galedonian snowstorm symbolic as that was. This day’s misfortune bore a doom far greater than the obvious and the immediate. Knowing that their beloved high king had died without a male heir, the winged news of Ederus’ death

would be received like the clap of doom by the werrin of Galedon as all would know it would throw the whole federation into a rudderless vacuum, sparking a power grabbing nightmare that would make this advancing storm look and feel in hindsight like a warm and enchanting breeze.

On their pitiful return to CaerCamelon, it was hoped by all these forlorn men that King Galan would assume the *rheolwr y grym* of Galedon and lead the federation forward in peace, just as he led them home in sorrowful silence this extraordinarily significant and shocking day. None were surprised however when soon after their arrival, King Galwyn's druids had stuck their desiccated bones into the political porridge. A '*royal throne challenge*' was issued by them when it transpired that there were no challengers to King Galan's expected ascension to the high throne of all Galedon. They could not accept Galan adopting the *rheolwr y grym* and perpetuating the federation in Ederus' great footsteps unopposed, as it just wasn't *Brythonic*. They had been so perturbed, one of their priests had suffered a prophetic nightmare. Galan had been the clear favourite and the expected peaceful recipient of the *llath y gallu gwyn*, but a wild druid's garish dream had changed all that.

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The twins Fer Le and Fer Gar had both received the bad news some days later and with great sadness from their restored fiefdoms in Iweriu. These two renowned swordsmen, who had left Prydein last year with their older brother Fer Rogain had returned across the northern channel just after dawn to be in Galedon this historic day. Conair Mór had exiled all three warriors to Albion for their apparent crimes in their homeland two years previously, but Ederus had sought them out following his victory and the defeat of Conair Mór's invasion the previous summer. Ederus had restored the three champions and had allied them to his cause and his *sarhaed* against that notorious Iweriuan king who had so reduced them. These now reelevated Iweriuan lords had returned from their reclaimed lands over the water, to pay their respects to the man who had given them back their lives and their honour. Fer Rogain remained at home recovering from

injuries received in the great and renowned battle in their homeland, but the twins would attend, and they would honour their oaths. They had known that news of their spectacular success in their motherland had reached Ederus well before his untimely death, but they had left it too late to give him the news of Conair Mór's true demise in person and were moved by this sad coincidence. These infamous twin brothers had sailed from Port Ruish to land at DunAyr on Epidia's coast with much relief, as it had been a rough crossing. Dressed in their familiar dark red, hooded cloaks of Ederus' royal guard and which had been a personal gift from the late king, these two elite swordsmen made a memorable sight. These blood red cloaks had been a small part of the imbursement for their prosecution of Ederus' *sarhaed* in their homeland, and coincidentally had added to their subsequent fame. The three infamous warriors had carried out their bold attack to much acclaim and equal disapproval from opposing factions at home, but regardless of the uproar and ignoring any possible repercussions, Fer Rogain, Fer Le and Fer Gar had led a force of seasoned and merciless killers supported by a number of bold charioteers into the hills overlooking the east coast. They had managed to corner and slaughter Conair Mór and his band there, high in the Dodder valley above Duibhinn, but not without a tremendous even historical clashing of notorious fighters. In the furious battle which ensued around the infamous hostel of Da Derga, it was destroyed by fire after three attempts, and all within had eventually perished including Conair Mór. Ederus' gift of the three red cloaks had done more than keep them warm, they had become synonymous with bold, even reckless courage that day and their draoith still sing of it.

These two hungry, thirsty, wind and sea battered brothers were tempted by a decent looking hostel near the wharf at Porth Ayr when they landed, but as they were provisioned well and were to meet Princess Brèa of the Fír-Damnonia the following morning, they had to press on and so they ignored its alluring welcome. Their eventual meeting place was a day's ride north yet and at the aber of the mighty Clwyd, where at the small village adjacent to the main north-south bridge over the river there was a

notable hostel. They knew the little princess and her two guardians had gone on to that inn yesterday, and they were to meet her there on arrival. An unforeseen delay had prevented them sharing passage with that little princess, whom they both knew well and were familiar with her father King Muirin and all his extended family. His royal flagship would have been far preferable to the smelly trader they had been forced to purchase passage on at first tide this morning, especially as it was still dark and the weather had been so inclement, but these two infamous men were determined to attend this sad event and would do whatever it took to get there in time.

King Ederus' untimely death had taken everyone who knew the great man by surprise, and King Muirin had sent his one remaining granddaughter to pay his and his tribe's respects. Muirin himself was too infirm for the journey, and his daughter Flaithan Berach was now running his Rath in his stead, so Princess Brèa the late Rèdan's sister was sent to represent the Fír, and she had arrived at Porth Ayr the previous day with two guardians. With just this coming night under the trees somewhere further up this main road, and with a fair run on their superb horses on arising early the next morning, the twins should reach that hostel late in the afternoon. Following an evening's respectful salutation with their awaiting combrogi, some well-earned rest and plenty of refreshment at that popular establishment, they would all travel together to CaerCamelon the next morning for the royal funeral. The monstrous ghost-fence border between these old, *old enemy* kingdoms had recently been breached by the nation's priesthood and was now wide open. These two perennially warring tribes had been brought together by Prydein's druidry and by their allied effort in the last war against Rome. The celebrated marriage of Prince Cadwy of Albion and Princess Eirwen of Galedon had also added a measure of cohesion to this union, and most of the people these Iweriuan twins had spoken to since landing seemed happy at the peace and the invaluable cross-border trading now possible. Those elevated and famed aristocrats would obviously be present at the great state funeral for Eirwen's father, and regardless of the solemn occasion Fer Le and Fer Gar

were to attend by rare invitation, they both looked forward to meeting the royal couple.

Their overnight camp and their ride to the Clwyd the next morning was a long and a cold one, but their double knitted red cloaks served them well once more. They were mistaken for Galedonian royal guards and left well alone as they rode these leafy lanes inland and then up the main road running through these northern territories. Voluminous enough to cover their plate armour and their weapons whilst mounted, these enviable hooded cloaks reached right down below their boot tops, and with the hoods thrown over their heads, Fer Le and Fer Gar were just two anonymous members of the late king's guard hurrying to his funeral up this broad, metalled and double ditched main road. Known as *Stryd Fawr Belenos*, this main routeway was part of a vast network of superior roads Belenos Hên and his great father High King Dyfnwal Fawr had built across this country more than three centuries ago. This stretch spanned the twenty-seven miles from Ayr on the west coast to *Treflan Pont*, high up the Clwyd estuary and to where King Berwyn ap Cylan of the Damnoniau had built his latest fortress. Newly built CaerGlâs' sharp palisades were silhouetted sharply against the darkening western horizon when they arrived at Treflan Pont, and both were bone weary from the cold miles up the seemingly endless road however accommodating. Fer Le and Fer Gar were grateful to have found this village and the long and thatched hostel at the head of this main road, and as their weary horses tramped over this enormous bridge, they looked forward to meeting their compatriots finally. Two small pieces of hack silver flipped to the respectful guard of his station had seen them both through the tollgate at the terminus of this huge bridge and onto the northern shoreline of Aber Clwyd. The long and rectangular hostel sitting in its own garden was a beacon of welcoming light and longed-for warmth, taking up one whole corner of Treflan Pont's incongruously wide main street which wound its potholed way onwards to Galedon and to all routes north. Once they had stabled their horses, the hosteller bade them welcome, offered them sustenance and showed them to their accommodation politely, but when they enquired about little Brèa

and her two bodyguards, the politeness evaporated. This hotelier went on to share his anger with them, in as much as their declared friends and companions had cleared off without paying him, and he was livid as they had demanded much on credit, even claiming Iweriuan royalty. The twins' own hospitality was thrown into doubt by this owner's anger, and they were instantly concerned. This man confirmed the royal party's arrival the previous day, and he also verified the hearty dinner with much ale and mead they had all enjoyed, and then the comfort of his rooms they had received on credit. They had set out this morning at dawn to make prayers at a local shrine but had never returned to settle their bill. Their host begrudgingly gave in to Fer Le and Fer Gar's *request* to search the daub walled cubicles of his big and thatched hostel, partly from the red cloaks of authority these grisly men wore, but mostly from their size, the gold torcs at their powerful throats, the long and expensive looking swords hanging from their belts and their sharply deteriorating demeanour.

As soon as they found a few expensive and personal valuables in the small, partitioned room which had obviously been the princess's quarters, the twins' concern deepened, as it was obvious too that she would never have left them behind. Their suspicion of this angry host lessened then as these things had clearly been unmoved, but with their apprehension and their undirected anger building, they had stood surety for the absent princess in her abandoned sleeping cubicle. Standing tall and displaying both their torcs and their swords, Fer Le and Fer Gar had confirmed Princess Brèa's royal lineage on their oaths along with their own nobility and in no uncertain terms, paying the man the sum owed and a little more for their own two pallets. The politeness returned in a flash on full payment of coin, and the owner of this busy hostel invited them to stay, showing them to a table by the fire in the main chamber and fetching them warm mead. It was almost dusk, and it would be pointless stumbling about in the dark looking for their missing friends at this hour regardless of their skills, and so, deeply worried about Princess Brèa and her two guards, Fer Le and Fer Gar ate an acceptable meal before settling down to

rest and to sleep. Dawn tomorrow, they would find Brèa and her two guardians come what may.

A cold sea fret had enveloped the whole aber of the Clwyd the following morning, and it frustrated both these anxious men as there was still no sign of their missing combrogi. The fog was so thick even the stable block was invisible from the hostel, and so attempting any tracking or travelling in it would be futile. Forced to accept the hosteller's extended and effusive hospitality until midday and parting with more silver, the brothers hulked impatiently around his hearth like two angry bears, just sipping at the mead and killing only time, for now. Eventually the mist lightened, the light grew, and Fer Le and Fer Gar were able to venture forth finally but in lugubrious mood, their concern for the missing young princess deeper this cold and damp afternoon. They soon picked up the trio's tracks heading from the stables, as since their own arrival nothing had moved in or out, making the job a lot easier. With their heads down and heading away from the stables at a slow walking pace for their horses, Fer Le noticed that one of the horses in the party of three had an obvious flaw in one shoe, again making it measurably easier to track these horses' hoof prints from the others on this muddy lane. As this obdurate mist finally dissipated completely, the two brothers managed expertly to track the spoor of these three particular horses to a crossroads where they took the lefthand track leading up into the forest overlooking the port, and so Fer Le and Fer Gar did the same. At a fork in this woodland path, they spotted a roadside temple in these trees and clearly built here long ages ago in worship of the great horned one; Cornonnyn. Erected just a few reeds back from this road in a small clearing, it had a fresh posy of wildflowers deposited within, and its vibrant beauty sharply contrasted against the faded and cracked interior of this small and now grey wooden temple. These flowers gave life once more to the inside of this dull but once brightly painted timber niche, with its ancient and cracked slate roof and its old and weathered, carved stone within. Dismounting to inspect these hoof prints on the road and around the entrance to this clearing more closely, their fears were elevated critically in that same instant.

"They were joined here by two riders coming fast." Fer Le growled, pointing out a bold set of tracks coming from the south. "One on a really big horse, and there was a fight here too. Look!"

"Blood!" His brother pointed out with a grimace.

Leading the horses by their reins, the pair followed this crusty trail of dark puddles away from the shrine and across the dust of this lane, following a row of scuff marks and dark splashes to the scrub at its opposite verge. To their horror and dismay they found the young princess there. She lay in some disarray in this overgrown, bramble covered ditch, and the branches overhead were daubed with her blood and that of her two guards, both of whom lay jumbled up and semi-naked beside her in conjoined death.

"What in Dub's name happened here? Robbery?" Fer Le looked at his brother aghast, the clear outrage identical on his own drawn face.

"It seems so brother, and it is a tragic thing that we lose a friend en-route to the funeral of another." Fer Gar responded morosely, grimacing at the grisly remains of the murder and robbery of three honest travellers and who had been stripped of everything, not an uncommon occurrence in any land these days.

"Damn, I don't relish telling Muirin and Berach!" Fer Le stated morosely, his eyes stark with the revelation in this foul ditch. "Both grandchildren gone!" He added morosely, shaking his big head. "If only they had waited for us!" He rued with sadness, hanging his head and finally tearing his gaze from that disgusting scene of such ruthless carnage.

"We'll inform the hostel keeper brother, and he can have his people recover the bodies and send message back over the water, then we must press on as Ederus' balefire will not wait for us either. We can also report this to Brittonic authority when we get there." Fer Gar stated in finality, before spitting to the road and turning away. Fer Le just grunted in response but bent to study the hoofprints of the two mysterious attackers' horses again, noting them well before marking the place of the bodies

with a small pile of stones to the side of this path. He remounted then, joining his twin, and they both galloped back down through these trees to the port of Ayr below and the warm comfort of the hostel, but just to report their findings before coming back the same way in a hurry but in moody silence.

Bel was long gone into the unseen western reaches when the two sorrowful brothers finally came within sight of Ederus' great caer, and all Fro Camelon below it was awash with the starlight of this fateful day's final minutes. Counterpointed by the light of thousands of burning torches below this stunning canopy, they rode quietly onto this riverine promontory and into the great maes before the high king's fortress. Built above a huge bend in the afon Carryn far below, it was an impressive caer to behold, and it was clear that there was very little time left before the event was to begin. It was clear too that much had been put in place for the approaching midnight ceremony as Fer Le and Fer Gar rode tiredly around the massive gathering of people ahead and before CaerCamelon's huge, stone-built gatehouse structure. A large timber platform had been erected at the head of this broad maes, and it was covered in a vast spread of waxed linen to protect the aristocrats in their sheepskins, leathers, and furs, whilst the werrin were consigned to the great outdoors in their layers of wool and cured hides. Exhausted and deeply saddened by their newest loss and this vast, sad gathering they had come to atop this broad isthmus, it was no surprise they were taciturn on their announcement and on their unassuming entry into this capital fortress of the Galedonau, which was packed to capacity for this forlorn event. Well known as friends to the late high king, Fer Le and Fer Gar were shown without delay to the refectory where they could rest and refresh themselves at leisure. These renowned Iweriuan champions accepted the offer of food and ale politely before drifting to the wings of this crowd for their quiet discussions, and then kept to themselves as was their lifelong habit.

Ederus' death had sparked a spasm of frantic power politics across Galedon, and as the high king had left no heir, there had been an ignominious scramble for the marble throne of the Galedonau behind the scenes. A painfully young and virtually unknown prince now sat on the marble throne of ArdFergus Fawr; the legendary and all-powerful *recognised* first high king of Galedon, and it dwarfed him. Although Fergus was the tenth generation since Cruithne, the great-great grandson of Partholóin himself, Fergus was remembered and honoured for founding the first real federation in the high north more than two millennia ago. Three dour and senior gŵyr in their long and hooded red cloaks stood behind this ancient throne of Fergus as this current young prince's advisors and counsellors, and these grisly men would remain in power until this twelve-year-old royal was of age and able to take the walk against the sun. However, the 'rheolwr y grym' over all the federation's tribes was up for grabs since Ederus' death, and so the stakes were far higher today, drawing all the *busy* players here for this great gathering before the king's balefire had even been lit. Galedonian *Princeling* Garn ap Birn in his oversized throne fell a long way short of consideration as King Galan of Epidia was the obvious frontrunner, but as Galan was a man of similar character and stature to Ederus, he had made a point of introducing himself to the nervous young Galedonian noble, offering his help and counsel on any and all matters. It seemed on the surface at least to the apprehensive werrin, that the affairs of this high northern federation were taking a normal and welcomed route, but as in all things religious, politic, and especially *Brythonic*, the way ahead was fraught with pitfalls. Absolutely anything could happen now in Galedon, and this insecurity was felt far deeper by the more knowledgeable nobility.

Cadwy had not taken his arm from around his wife's shoulders throughout the deeply moving and emotional build up to this fraught procedure. The voices of the bards rose with the droning of the druids around them and as the monstrous fire platform before them was encircled by white gowned priests. This long, solemn row of druids and bards processed around it in their ponderous way, scattering drops of sacred water onto

the pyre from bronze bowls using branches of Rowan, and their scarlet berries shone like droplets of wet blood in the torchlight. The werrin and the servants wept, and even the watching slaves at the periphery were compelled to weep in a miserable empathy. To one side of this huge throng stood six big royal guards from Breged in their gleaming chest plates and dark green cloaks, and as their king was indisposed, these doughty soldiers had charged north to be here from CaerUswr to pay that federation's respects. They stood tall and proud to do so now, with the light from the rows of flaming torches and the stars above flashing off their gleaming, ceremonial armour and their fir green capes. Although Cridas was recovering from a minor illness, he was not yet well enough to attend either, and so the gŵyrd of Albion had come north with their crown prince and his Galedonian wife, who was daughter to this dead king. The aristocracy of Albion had come to pay their king's and their nation's deepest respects regardless of their historic relationships. These huge and seasoned Albion warriors were gathered in a ring of steel around the royal couple in their woad-blue cloaks and mantles. Cadwy and Eirwen were enwrapped in furs and thick wool under these cold and fateful stars to witness this great state funeral of her father's, but their real guardians were standing to either side of them. They took the form of two enormous and infamous gentlemen of Galedon surprisingly, and a pair of impressive warriors no sane man would approach with an incorrect attitude. Neither needed any introduction anywhere across these lands as the blue talisman of the one and the sheer jaw-dropping size of the other were enough to identify these two peerless individuals, whose eyes this night were those of two eagles. There were many light-footed lords and priests dashing about, and it was clear that much political machination was afoot across this fortified promontory, but none escaped the cold and covert scrutiny of these two men. With Prince Cadwy and his Albion lords making an eminent and hugely capable guard to their beloved princess, Olwydd and Brith were like two monstrous wraiths in the grounds of the caer this night, and one or other would appear in the wings occasionally to check on Eirwen, before melting away again to continue their observations of all

the power players and the politicians in their perceived *secret* conclaves. All the northern tribes had gathered for this royal funeral as it was not just *any* royal send off. This was the pyre of a high king and the ruler of the great federation of Galedon no less, and so the air was thick with the votive smoke of the druids who orchestrated all here today.

Ederus' pyre was an enormous and flat-topped pyramid of dressed oak beams, which had taken over a hundred felled trees to construct along with dozens of strong men and many ladders. His linen-wrapped body sat atop this high and interlaced fortress of transmutation now, and although strewn with flowers, you could see by the outline under the white folds of his shroud that the king's hands were clasped over his heart. The stars above Ederus counted down the minutes left for his physical presence on this earth to end, and the Albion aristocracy watched and waited, as did all Galedon. Prince Cadwy's infamous *hênmodryb*; the Lady Meleri of Albion had come all the way from Aquitaine to be here, and she had taken complete and immediate control of the procedure. Meleri had also declared that although no one could replace the late HênDdu, she had resigned her offices at the Garon College in Agenais in Gallia and she had returned to Prydein indefinitely to lead their religion through this fractious period, and Eirwen for one had been absolutely delighted. Their meeting had been an emotional one, and it had meant a great deal to both Eirwen and Cadwy as Meleri had laid her hands on Eirwen's hugely protruding stomach and had confirmed that all was well with their baby. They both wanted to spend more time with Meleri, and Eirwen especially chafed to see her again, but the brif-druiden of all Prydein was so busy they would only catch fleeting glimpses of her dashing here and there, surrounded by a frantic rush of dozens of chattering figures in white linen.

"My Lady, there is a Princess Brèa here from Iweriu to pay her respects. She is a family member of a King Muirín of the Fír-Damnonia and she has respectfully requested an audience." Lydia whispered at Eirwen's elbow, and her princess smiled for the first time in many days.

“Why yes of course I’ll see her Lydia! I told you about little Rêdan didn’t I? Brêa was the sister she spoke about at home, when she risked her life and lost it sadly helping me survive that dreadful ordeal.” Lydia nodded gravely in response, as she had come to learn every harrowing detail of her mistresses’ almost fatal kidnapping of last summer. It had been made consummately worse, as Lydia had been away at her mother’s home throughout the first part of her Lady Eirwen’s trial.

Lydia carefully led her heavily pregnant princess by the hand toward the back of this dais and the throng of nobles crowding it. With a nod to the guard who quickly unhooked the rope, Lydia led her princess out of the royal enclosure to where several minor dignitaries and local businessmen stood to watch the procedure. These well-dressed people drew apart for this famous lady in her mourning black to reveal these incongruous visitors. A tiny, elfin like girl in a fine beaded dress stood there among them and below the biggest man Eirwen had ever seen in her life, as he must have stood well over seven feet tall. This broad-shouldered colossus had coarse features, thick limbs and would even tower over Gŵyr Brith Fawr, a thing she had thought quite impossible until that enlightening but uneasy moment. Brea’s dress was eye catching however, and it had been beaded in the familiar tribal forms unique to the Damnonia of Iweriu. These swirling, interlinking patterns were very similar to the designs worn by the aristocracy of King Berwyn’s *Brythonic* Damnonians, who although distantly related were very different in most things, but only an expert would tell their intricate tribal designs apart. This prepubescent little girl looked absolutely stunning in her courtly dress among the fashionable and the well-appointed, the tightly sewn rows of polished beads glinting with the colours of a rainbow as they caught the torchlight.

“Brêa?” Eirwen enquired of this childlike young lady, trying to ignore the inconceivably huge brute standing beside her. He blocked out so much of the starlight, he made her entirely nervous. Her attention was drawn away from this hulking and ugly giant however as Eirwen was blessed by the

most engaging smile from Princess Brèa, whose dark eyes had sparkled brightly before she bowed to her with the utmost respect.

One of the two guards opened the roped off section for royalty again, and Eirwen drew this little girl and her gigantic protector over to the Albion corner on the front of this broad dais, and it soon became obvious to her that the monster was mute. He was capable only of a wet and indecipherable gargling sound, as at some point in his life his tongue had obviously been torn out. Brèa and her ungainly giant however communicated without words, and it would take just a flashing look from this neat little princess and a swift hand signal for the man to bow and obey her in an instant. This impossibly large man was clearly devoted to his diminutive charge, and although the vacant expression on his long and haggard face gave insight to his limitations, he made a ferocious looking guardian. The introductions were made to Prince Cadwy and two of his famous Albion lords, and this odd couple were ensconced in the seats within this elevated group but behind them in the rearmost row so that Eirwen and Brèa could catch up on news of King Muirin, especially this little girl's aunt the ferocious Princess Berach who had made such an impression on Eirwen. Although welcoming the distraction from her grief, she was also extremely interested in how Berach had coped with the return to her father's dun, and she drew this little girl into her conversation. Brèa looked nothing like Rèdan apart from the coal black and unfathomable eyes, but she brought Eirwen up to date with all that had happened in her homeland and in the twelve months since Eirwen's daring rescue from the lawless Rhobogdioi. Although saddened by the news of her father's decline, Eirwen was thrilled at the news of Berach running the Fír-Damnonia from her father's rath, as that was one impressive lady who needed a challenge in her opinion. Had Eirwen looked a little deeply at Brèa and had not been so distracted by the occasion, she may perhaps have noticed a familial similarity in her pinched face to another woman she had known briefly, but the age difference was great and the similarity fleeting. More vitally, those jewels of hereditary likeness that most people notice and compare; the eyes

could not fully factor, and so Eirwen completely missed the ephemeral resemblance.

Unknown to all these Albion aristocrats around her, this little girl had a dark and deeply mysterious upbringing, being raised as the chosen and most accomplished acolyte of a monstrous woman of Iweriuan descent and of notorious reputation. Her mentor had been a disreputable and black-hearted woman of no small power, and one who had died almost as long ago as when her hostess this night; this beautiful Galedonian princess had escaped her captivity. Having evaded the sacrifice her *grandmother* was going to make of this haughty, imperious princess and her unborn child, this little girl was here to redress that. Her undisclosed name was Schechel *Allaid*, and she had not made the long trek from Damnonia in the midlands of Iweriu but had come from much further north. She had taken the much shorter route from the late *Rhiogan Dub's* dark fortress of DunSandaél, but in great secrecy. Her grandmother had been the notorious black witch who had controlled that northern peninsula with a relentless grip of pure and superstitious terror, but Rhiogan Dub had died in terrible and drawn-out agony from the wound to her eye inflicted by Eirwen. That excruciating wound had festered and being so close to the brain it had been impossible for the witch or her healers to combat, and it had proved decisive. Before her unbearable and agonising death however, the blinded witch had sworn her granddaughter, who was her most fearsome and implacable acolyte to wreak her revenge on Eirwen and her baby. Schechel the 'wild' had readily agreed, swearing the ancient oath of *galanas* on her knees and before her dying grandmother's reeking black altar. She had trained for weeks in this wicked endeavour, learning everything that she would need to know about the Albion and Galedonian royal families, with a long-term plan to inveigle herself into one of their households following a glowing royal reference. She was to affect the death of Eirwen and her child in some way thereafter, her speciality being poisoning, but King Ederus' accidental death had offered her and her tribe a golden opportunity. Their murderous plans had been radically altered and brought forward, and the assassin Schechel *Allaid*

was sent north over the water to capitalise on Ederus' welcomed and surprising death, but their bold and almost recklessly altered plan now promised suicidal consequences for her in any event. Schechel *Allaid* was unfazed by this certain self-sacrifice that was so abruptly demanded of her, and she set herself to studying hard all the details she may be called upon to reveal whilst playing out her deadly charade, utterly determined to fulfil her oath to her dying grandmother whatever the cost to her. Intelligence had revealed that although incapable of making the long journey himself, old King Muirin had decided to honour Ederus by sending his only remaining granddaughter in his stead to offer his and his people's deepest sympathies, and so a dark deed had been quickly germinated, as if the Rhobogdioi were anything they were cunning. In the full glare of a national and highly public event, this little girl was to carry out a suicidal attack on Eirwen and her unborn with a poisoned blade, and knowing there would and could be no escape, she would announce to the world who she really was and exactly who it was who had sent her once she had achieved her mission. Whatever then ensued and whatever consequences unfolded thereafter, she would welcome and was prepared for. Waylaying the real Damnonian princess and her two bodyguards had been a simple matter for her peerless guardian and done on Brittonic soil for obvious reasons. Impersonating Brèa came easily with all that she knew and all that she had learned, but she hadn't bargained for the return of the druiden Meleri and her leading this funeral service. It had thrown her into a panic on arrival, but thankfully that druiden had been kept busy and away from her as that was one lady who could not be fooled. Annoyingly, the wretch's fawning husband would not leave her side for a moment, and so, with Schechel *Allaid*'s monstrous guardian standing behind her at the ready, this Rhobogdian assassin sat less than a foot behind her mark and waited impatiently for her opportunity with her tiny black eyes glittering like cold and wet pebbles.

Cadwy had noticed the incongruous looking pair when they had first arrived, but then so had everyone else and mostly from the unbelievable size of this little girl's guardian. He easily stood seven feet six in his boat

like warboots and was by far the biggest man Cadwy had ever seen. The introductions had eased his discomfort a little now he knew Brèa's identity and as he knew and respected her family, but as they had been seated directly behind them, the big man's proximity unnerved him and it had set the little alarm in the back of his head tingling. The giant was unarmed as demanded, but Brèa was allowed her honour-dagger of course. Even as the personal blades of the Iweriuan aristocracy were much shorter than their footlong Brythonic counterparts, the thought of that enormous brute getting his hands on the dagger on little Brèa's belt and running amok with it did not sit comfortably. It was ludicrous really as they had been nothing but polite and courteous since their introduction, and although that man-mountain had an unreadable visage of hideous and chiselled granite, he was mute, and he seemed passive enough. He seemed entirely under the little princess' control too which was reassuring, but then there was that mercurial *something* in Brea's dark eyes which worried him, and the faint tingling of his hunting alarm persisted annoyingly. Shaking his head and with a rueful grin Cadwy suppressed his alarm, knowing he had become over-sensitive toward the safety of his pregnant wife of late, but it was no surprise considering all that she had endured. Cursing himself for a sensitive fool, Cadwy forced his shoulders to relax, appreciating that it was the man's sheer size which had unsettled him. Even his colossal combrogi Brith would be forced to look up to someone for the first time in his life, and Cadwy grinned at the thought. Looking up and still smiling, he sought out his comrade, but Brith had retired to the refectory or to an ale tent with his partner-in-crime Olwydd Hîr obviously, and so Cadwy put his concerns to one side. He settled down to await the start of this sad funeral service again whilst Eirwen chatted quietly with these eccentric late arrivals behind him, and there was finally some activity in the great maes before them. Lady Meleri took up her position before the altar in the near distance and before the huge pyramid of interlaced tree trunks which made up the balefire of Ederus, and the dozens of priests and priestesses who gathered around her for the opening of this weighty ceremony continued in their endless litany to all

the attendant Gods. Everybody on this dais sat up now, and Eirwen alongside him ended her conversation to face forward once more as that reedy note from the druids faded. Olwydd and Brith returned to the left apron of this broad dais, but they would not catch Cadwy's eye and seemed to be scanning the crowd behind him. He knew those two furtive gentlemen had been covering a lot of ground in the last few hours, in an attempt no doubt to keep abreast of all the secret meetings and silent subterfuge that was going on all over the headland of Fro Camelon, most of their observations being carried out unobserved as expected. They seemed to be on the trail of some other political or scandalous intrigue now, involving someone in the crowd behind Cadwy, and he wished he could join them, but as duty was all he remained sitting next to Eirwen. He threw his arm around her shoulders once more, focussing again on his regal great-aunt in the middle distance; his wife's mentor and her tutor from college. Now, as the very latest pre-eminent priest of this country inspected that great timber pyramid, roughly fifty reeds from this platform, Cadwy forced himself to relax as the infamous Lady Meleri of the White Isles began the opening incantations.

Nine burly lords of the *Gŵyrd y Gogledd* with their shining breastplates draped in the blood red of their infamous cloaks encircled the huge, flat-topped timber pyramid of their late liege lord, each an old friend and a lifelong servant to the great king laid out on its crown. Each seasoned gŵyr was armed with a roaring torch, and as the tears fell down their grisly faces to wriggle through their curly beards, these men lowered their flames together. Slowly, the circle of nine torches dipped to the footing of this huge timber pyramid, and the drums began to hammer and the bronze horns blare. The flames licked hungrily up the oil wetted timbers and flared hotly, making these *lords of the king's honour guard* step back quickly. The flames soared higher then, higher than the soaring voices of the bards, and it drowned out the monotony of Meleri, her druids and her druidens with a great roar, driving a thick coil of black smoke high into the limitless and starlit heavens above them all. As the flames began to shoot out from between the gaps at the sides of this huge pyre, the fire became

so overpowering it drove this huge ring of warriors and the many priests back from its savage blast, making them shield their eyes from its searing intensity. The surging waves of heat could be felt even from the dais by the wide-eyed royalty and their supporting nobility, and all their eyes were raised then as the flames soared upwards. Tears fell from many as the high king of all Galedon's spirit was thus consumed and sent down to the *Dark Lord*, and the vacuum of his leaving was felt by every grieving soul here in CaerCamelon. Ten of Ederus' finest cattle had been sacrificed, and their carcasses had been added to heart of that huge pyre as it was being built. Finally, and in great ceremony the broken body of his stallion Caddogddu who had perished with him was placed into the centre, and the construction completed around him. All were consumed by Bel's ferocious earthly spirits now, and these livid flames spat and flared as they consumed the beloved beasts of Ederus to his eternal glory. The form of the king slowly vanished as the flames reached higher, consuming him and spewing a vast cloud of glowing red sparks and embers high into the night sky, and all were entranced as they watched. Tears broke then for the hardened few, those who had held onto them thus far. Eirwen wept for her father as Cadwy did his best to console her, and many around them were heartbroken for this grieving princess, as she owned a small of part of all their hearts. It all seemed to happen so quickly then, Eirwen did not have the time to be fearful for either herself or her unborn as in a heartbeat, a huge and violent uproar exploded directly behind her. She was even shoved in the back by the sudden upheaval, and Cadwy leapt to his feet beside her, spinning around in an instant and drawing his dagger in alarm. Both their eyes flew open in shock at what they saw. Brith Fawr, Olwydd Hîr and another huge and fearsome warrior were suddenly wrestling with the seven-foot Iweriuan monster directly behind them, and chairs flew in every direction. With an enormous crash these four gigantic men hit the decking of this dais, shattering the boards under them. Tables flew and noble people scattered everywhere as these aristocrats scrambled clear, all except one. One huge Iweriuan champion in a blood red hooded cloak remained standing in this clearing, and he was holding

the false little Princess Brèa up by her wrists. In her hand was her dagger, and the blade had obviously been smeared with some unspeakable black filth. Her white, skinny legs were thrashing in mid-air under her spectacular and sparkling dress, but Fer Gar held her up with ease in one huge hand. A ferocious smile twisted his hard features at that moment and at her impotent fury. With one squeeze of his powerful fingers the poisoned dagger fell from this little girl's whitened fingers, and then she screamed.

Lucky it was that the *arwein* had mentioned the arrival of their uncommon countryman and his royal charge on the twin's arrival at their allotted positions as his rare and remarkable size had singled him out, and especially as the princess he guarded was so small. Following a hurried inspection of the stables, Fer Gar and Fer Le had frantically sought out the two legendary Galedonians when they discovered the subterfuge, and they had got to the royal dais without one moment to spare. On command, the dumb giant had produced a long blade from his boot in protection of his mistress and as she carried out her murderous deed, but in the immediate clutches of these four unmatched men of war they were both doomed. Unbalanced in moments and pressed to the ground, this monstrous brute was disarmed, and Olwydd then calmly cut his throat from ear to ear. The monster still struggled mightily as he poured his steaming lifeblood through the raft of splintered planks and to CaerCamelon's parade ground under him, having to be held down by all three huge men until his powerful struggles and his agonised gurgling abated. Throughout this giant's wordless hot and choking demise, his assassin mistress had screamed and spat and she had howled her impotent fury at them all but held fast in the unbreakable grip of a grinning Fer Gar she had been powerless. The crowd around them were beside themselves in their excitement, drawing back in to surround them all and all chattering like birds. Declaring her cold and bloody mission and who it was who had sent her, Schechel *Allaid* spewed out her hatred and her bloody oath of murderous *galanas* to all these shocked northern aristocrats. Her treason was carried outwards in a gossiping babble, and

the whole maes became alive with news of this narrowly averted calamity. Eirwen had turned an alabaster white, the horror clear on her face as she looked at the blackened blade on the ground and at the screaming little horror swinging in the Iweriuan's hand. The shock faded as it became clear that the threat to her had been stopped, and Eirwen turned into Cadwy's embrace having seen enough. From behind her, Lydia produced a kitchen knife from under her apron in a flash, and that doughty young lady from Gabrantofica was advancing on the dangling killer. She was about to commit hot murder on her mistress' behalf, but a word from Cadwy; her name stopped her in her tracks. This gabbling, surrounding crowd parted then as Meleri and her attendant, white-gowned flock came in a rush to claim this little murderess. There was a very long-established procedure for dealing with paid assassins in Prydein and it involved a simple wooden post and an extremely hot fire. As the priesthood dragged Schechel *Allaid* away, she collapsed to the sandy practice ground and died in foaming convulsions, poisoning herself rather than face the justice of Prydein's implacable druids, and the gossip grew wings across this vast interior.

The bale fire was well in advance by the time this fracas had ended and the aristocrats were reseated, but Cadwy had seen enough, and with Hefin, Brast, Bleddyn and their guardsmen, along with the two towering Galedonians in close attendance, Eirwen was ushered away to her old private chambers in this caer to rest and to recuperate. The ferocious Iweriuan champions Fer Gar and Fer Le remained, to much approbation and personal admiration from all these grateful Albion and Galedonian nobles for their timely arrival and intervention, being especially feted by the Albion nobility as they had surely averted a catastrophe here tonight. These two lauded champions were finally able to pay their own respects to this noble but late king who had shown them such faith, and so they approached the priests' altar on this broad maes together. In due deference, side-by-side and with a pair of deep and matching bows, Fer Le and Fer Gar left a blackened and crisply burned right hand on the altar top near the king's pyre, and it had a heavy but soot smeared ring on one

misshapen, black and sticklike finger. This they had brought with them in a leather bag, and they placed it atop this altar now for all to see. The chipped and ancient stone altar of Galedon was awash with a blazing firelight from the dying balefire of Ederus, and it starkly highlighted this charred claw on its blood-stained surface. No words were necessary from these two giants of men as they bowed once more and in final farewell. No one here was in any doubt as to the royal identity of that burned hand's erstwhile and late owner, and the eyes of the onlookers pressed in around these two huge warriors were shrouded from this stark knowledge.

The *true* high king of this ancient and original kingdom of Galedon took a careful and softly placed step forward, to brave the fringes of this vast Galedonian forest behind him and to investigate what had caused such a disturbance on this isolated fringe of his vast empire. His wise old eyes narrowed at the huge balefire in the distance and at the antlike forms scurrying around it, and he snorted twin clouds of his outrage through his nostrils and into this cold highland air. Content through some innate intuition, this awesome looking monarch knew that these distant creatures came and went, but he knew too that they were deadly in close proximity. They were to be avoided at all costs, but thankfully they were far enough away from him this night. They posed no threat to his vast tribe either, spread out behind him throughout this vast forest in support, but he had seen enough, and he nodded, in acceptance perhaps of the inevitable. The magnificent crown of twelve antler points atop his noble head dipped too as this king stag backed away, retreating into the sanctuary of his forest kingdom of the red deer. His harem of *gawres* gathered around him in a protective circle, as with his huge head held high and his leonine mane draping his muscular shoulders, this true high king of Galedon strutted down this woodland path and back to his caer. His magnificent, crowned head swayed from side to side as he walked home with an enormous pride, and all the big eyed, beautiful red ladies around him were snuffling and bowing their heads with the utmost deference.



Chapter Seven.

King Galwyn of Fachomagia had been literally forced into a throne challenge by his druids and by his more ambitious gŵyrd, so, tomorrow he must fight his old friend King Galan of Epidia with his sword and to the death. He is Gods-sworn to fight for the ruling power of all Galedon in this impending bout of royal combat, and he has been preparing himself for this deadly challenge all week.

Galwyn and his Fachomagian gŵyrd arrived an hour ago at this coastal citadel in sombre attitude but displaying their usual ostentatious wealth. They were encamped now at the western corner of this broad maes and at the approaches to DunAdda, which was bedecked in black flags this cold and blustery, ominous day. There they awaited the celebrated lord of this legendary fortress, and they were shown the utmost deference and hospitality, and had the most stunning views to entertain them while they waited. The surrounding mountains were high and still draped with snow, and their wind carried its sharp edge all the way down to this fractured coast, the infamous twin island fortress attached to it and the multitude which crowded in and around it today. It seemed as if all northern Prydein had turned out for this fraught event, here at this Epidian fortress which had been duly chosen by the druid council for this historic throne challenge. The adjacent tref was bursting to capacity with people who had come from far and wide to witness the royal swordfight taking place here tomorrow, and it too was festooned in black flags and bunting. This bank of the Sea Loch Linne along both sides of the huge timber causeway was lined with fishermen as usual, but the field adjacent to Tref Adda behind them was filled with large tents and marquees, all thronged with busy traders and visitors for this historic yet deeply troubling occasion.

Everyone's attention was drawn to the broad, eastern drover's road vanishing into the distant trees, as loud and sudden war horns began to blare rudely into the cold air from its fringes. With Bel still in his first quadrant, King Galan of Epidia arrived back at his capital caer, returning from the hunt in all his splendour. Flanked by twenty-four of his finest winged warrior knights, he broke the distant treeline, and even from the loch the sun could be seen glinting off his fabulous arms and his priceless armour. Knowing that all in the north were watching and awaiting him this historic day, Galan's horsemanship was empirical, making he and Galwena under him look like one awesome and athletic beast as he cantered from the trees and down the hill. Galan had refused to postpone his normal morning at the hunt just for a swordfight, demonstrating to all his lack of concern and his unshakeable self-belief in today's outcome. His and his surrounding gŵyr's horses were the very finest in the known world, drawing looks of envy from all who beheld them as they cantered from the great forest stretching out endlessly behind them. Their riders' vibrant and pale-blue cloaks put the grey sky above them to shame this morning, and they were simply magnificent as they advanced in their precise formation. The *golden* wings on the king's helmet at their centre flashed their warning as these Epidian knights galloped down to the port in fine style, and the Lady Galwena under Galan was spurred by the sight of her island home. She arrived at the head of the long timber causeway in a flurry of flying turf and snow, rearing on her hind legs and flailing her huge killing fore hooves in furious introduction and challenge. Everyone backed away in alarm as this was the very finest warrior-knight in all Prydein and on the most famous horse, his fearsome reputation being rooted here in these western coastal reaches. Galan was clearly filled with pride, and his relaxed confidence was also clear for all to see in his consummate horsemanship and in his poise, as he caused Galwena to rear up again and to begin spinning around on her hind legs, his encircling gŵyrd doing the same. Pirouetting their horses with their blue cloaks swirling around them, they all looked stunning. The alarm on the faces of all these onlookers was transformed into ones of admiration as these

spectacular knights mounted the solid timber apron to the massive causeway, and the applause was so loud and the cheering so ribald, it drowned out the thunder their horses hooves made on those shivering timbers. Their king had come home and in some style, so their cheering became riotous as Galan and his gŵyrd charged across the timber sarn to his capital caer and to the location and primary focus of this day's fraught events. There would be a whole night of interminable religious ceremony before the 'royal throne challenge' could take place the following day, but the town facing this twin island-stronghold was gearing up for a different night completely. Tonight, Tef Adda would descend into a beer-soaked festival and many long, song filled hours of celebration would ensue by the countless werrin gathered here and by these hundreds of visiting sightseers. The aristocracy remained passive however and remained within the stone-built precincts of DunAdda, preferring quiet and subdued conversation and warm mead or continental wine to the drunken lunacy in the town over the causeway.

Outside the keep but protected within these walls from the wild waters of Loch Linne and from the witless townsfolk over them, the druid's ceremonies were already long-prepared, and the assembled priests finally declared themselves ready with a sharp but reedy blast on a deer horn. These forlorn nobles then filed out from under the primary thatch of Galan's palace buildings to stand under the pale stars above, drinks in hand, and just as the land around them darkened under a cold but softly falling dusk. The druids had gathered in their circular conclave on this great parade ground of DunAdda before them, and they began their procedure with a great flash of vivid blue from their altar. Over that crackling, fizzing and popping, terrifying and highly unpredictable blue flame on the druids' altar, and amid their lamenting droning and the sonorous, harmonised singing of their bards around them, the gŵyrd of Epidia along with the privileged leaders of all Galedon's other tribes waited impatiently for these rites to complete. Persistent waves of raucous noise from the town carried over the rushing waters of the Linne and these high walls, and this mindless cacophony seemed to annoy a

great many of these priests, but they persisted with their rituals regardless. It would be several hours before these aristocrats could retreat for the meat and the ale awaiting them in that warm and inviting great hall, and they had a great deal to discuss before dawn too, when their king would fight for his life and possibly theirs.

As a new day firmed across Epidia with a golden, heaving upswell of light from the east, Ynys Epona was in uproar, with stewards and servants rushing about as if DunAdda's secondary but adjoined island citadel was afire. Apart from the blazing hearths, the only flames in DunAdda's Ynys Epona this freezing cold morning came from the fire lit under these frantic workers by their animated king. Regardless, or perhaps because of the impending throne challenge this historic day, Galan had gone through his fortress and the adjoining stable island as a *Rhingyll* goes through his barracks at dawn, and everybody had jumped to his barked-out orders. Since Ederus' death, Galan had been virtually unapproachable by all but his closest gŵyr and family members, and he had stoically kept his own company leading up to this unfortunate day. On this lugubrious and impromptu tour of his caer this bright morning however the king of Epidia had declared that the renovation of the royal stables on Ynys Epona was long overdue, and it had galvanised the inhabitants of both these strongholds. All the stewards, indentured servants and a whole army of slaves had been kept busy throughout this capital caer all morning, and it now shone with the attention that had been lavished upon it.

Around noon, cartloads of dirty straw and dung had wound their way around DunAdda's perimeter, before trundling over the long timber causeway which joined these two island forts to the land. Once these half-dozen carts reached the correct enclosure at the outskirts of town, the farm labourers at this processing facility would unload this fertilizing gold from each vehicle with their long wooden forks, and another *coelbren* notch would be cut into their supervisor's tally stick. Then it would be off to the next location for the carters with their empty vehicles and to where they would be loaded up with fresh bedding straw. The two fortified

islands out in the sound with their linked umbilical cord of dressed timber and the long timber sarn to the first all seemed to float serenely on the ruffled, iron-grey and frigid surface of the great sea Loch Linne this icy morning. A squadron of startingly white herring gulls encircled the great caer from on high, awaiting the docking of the fishing boats far below them with a garrulous anticipation, just as the people staring up at them from the harbour wharves awaited this day's portentous events. The dotted line of ox-drawn carts made their return journey down through the town to the long timber jetty and then across the main causeway, each loaded down with fresh and clean bedding straw, and their rumbling transit over the oaken planks sounded like rolling thunder across the water.

A generous hearth-fire blazed in the great hall of the royal palace within this first island and the capital fortress of Epidia. This long and thatched, ancient chamber was clean, as it had been recently swept and fresh straw had been scattered on the packed earth. It was filled now with the assembled gŵyrd of Epidia and a great many other notable warriors and nobles, all arriving from across greater Galedon and further afield to bear witness to this impending, seminal event in northern Prydein. The Federation was represented here in all its factions, and in one quiet corner sat a group of taciturn ghost-warriors who also awaited the results of this portentous day. Even the mighty Gadwyr were present, led by the legend that was Gŵyr Brith Fawr, and there was a comfortable space left around their tables. This accommodation had been made for the comfort of everybody else rather than these enormous, muscular warriors as there was an earthy *whiff* of decay emanating from these giants which reminded everyone of death. The malodorous Gadwyr made these long, benched tables look like children's furniture under them, and they hulked over them on their elbows this morning, clutching their little logs of beer with their fiery red hair catching golden lights in this wavering firelight. They echoed their combrogi's interest in today's outcome and adopted too the ghost-warrior's silence, but none seemed approachable anyway, and so they were left alone in their funk to wait and to glower down at

everyone through the smoke. Galan sat imperiously on his '*kneeling stallions*' throne at the centre of the broad dais at the head of this long hall, chin in hand, studying the bone board before him and discussing all that was in play here in his caer and in wider Prydain with his gŵyrd, especially the events on the south coast of Caint. Reaching out, he slid one of the silver-dipped knuckle bones along two positions on the gaming board to support another, and Galan looked up to his gŵyr and his pencampwr Gryffen with a smirk.

"Get out of that without moving!" Galan chortled, and his burly champion just shook his head, throwing up his hands.

"One day lord, I will beat you!" Gryffen ap Idwal growled, still shaking his head, and staring at the board in a vain attempt to comprehend his swift and unexpected demise.

"Let us hope that Roman bastard is just as blind to subterfuge Gryffen, or there won't be much left of Afarwy's Trinobanta for Caswallawn *Fawr* to plunder by the time he leaves." Galan told the man this with an arched eyebrow, drawing another smirk from his champion.

From latest reports, King Caswallawn of the Southern Brythons was acquitting himself well and intelligently despite the forces arrayed against him, demonstrating excellent control over his tribal warriors. This was especially true regarding *engaging* and *disengaging* from the enemy, which has always been a huge problem given the almost uncontrollable way in which many Brythons fought. From all accounts, Caswallawn had trained the core of his army throughout the winter, and this prepared army of his had met the Romans again at the Afon Gryffdŵr crossing, using chariot warfare all along the riverbank and to good effect. However, following a hard-fought battle they were flanked by Caesar's superb cavalry and forced to withdraw tactically, making the Romans pursue them into the woods but at a terrible cost to themselves. It was undeniable however that the Romans had the best of it at day's end. King Galan's latest reports pointed out that Caswallawn had now adopted the

long planned scorched earth, guerrilla style of warfare he had developed throughout the winter, with much expert advice and military counsel from martial masters from across this great country. As of three days ago, he was destroying local food sources and using his chariots to harass the Roman legions if they drew too close or if any of his notorious cavalry strayed too far from the host. So far and despite his losses, that bold southern king was staying ahead of the Roman, but there was a great deal yet to accomplish before Julius Caesar could be persuaded to leave once more.

“That Roman bastard should have been thrown back into the sea the day he landed, and if we had all been officially.... ah dog’s scabby balls to it all. There is just no point moaning about it anymore. Why do we keep picking at the wound?” Gryffen scowled, mirroring all his men’s attitudes. “That arrogant, insulting bastard Caswallawn has made his bracken, so he must now lie in it, and I for one don’t give a hoot what happens to those soft bloody southerners!” This burly Epidian champion finished with a snarl, still staring at the board before him in confusion. Galan regarded him with a measure of surprise as his champion was normally a taciturn man, but his prime swordsman and personal protector had voiced the very thing which had divided this great country like nothing before. None of these Epidians were impressed by Caswallawn’s attempts at the repulsion of *Cwnfelyn Rhyfeinig* so far, as in their scornful opinions Caesar had become encouraged by his perceived victories. Galan and many here had successfully fought against his machinelike legionaries last year, and now aware of the southern king’s restrictions and his growing inabilities, they were even more furious at their exclusion. Along with his bemused sword master Gryffen, most here could not have cared less what happened to those *soft* southerners now. The hard won but crucial *undeb* they had achieved last year had united all Prydein, but that had all been turned on its head by that southern king’s notorious ‘northern exclusion’. Due to his hubris the reverse was now true, and southern Prydein had never been so fractured and divided. Sadly, those egocentric, selfish beliefs had stretched their long and cynical fingers of disunity northward

like a creeping sickness. These northerners did however agree and were comforted by a firm, joint belief; that however ambitious and daring the 'Yellow Dog of Rome' was, he was not stupid enough to march north and to poke a hornet's nest. Given enough time to become bored down south, not an uncommon experience to many a northerner, they expected Caesar to return to Gallia soon anyway, and if all Lloegr was left in flames when he left, King Caswallawn would get precious little sympathy from these injuriously sidelined northern warriors.

Stewards began to close the inner shutters and to feed the hearth fires in this great hall as a few of these *hard* northern visitors had begun to shiver. It was officially summertime, but that felt like a nasty joke in these parts as all were wrapped in furs against this bitter wind, those that could afford such luxuries. This cruel highland wind had sharp teeth this day, whistling and howling ominously through any crevice in this building with each gust outside, and a mournful chorus would usher through the cracks in the walls inside, competing with, and occasionally complementing the dark words spoken by these serious people in Galan's great hall. The king's beautiful bone board was put away, and discussion on the Roman war ended abruptly as a well-known visitor had entered the hall. This man strode the length of this freshly scrubbed hall to respectfully approach the dais as he had on many previous occasions. With a cursory nod from Galan, this visitor stepped up to the white rod on the ground and stopped there to deliver his entreaty with a deep and formal bow.

"He had no choice in the matter lord, I can assure you! This is the last thing King Galwyn wanted, you must know this lord, as he has held you in the highest regard all his life. He was given no alternative from Oric Gwyn even to *give* the ground, for as you know lord our priests in Fachomagia are powerful!" This red faced Fachomagian emissary told Galan earnestly and in support of his king before bowing again with all deference. All here knew his words to be true, as this man's king was indeed an old friend and an admirer of this monarch before him, but the value of that friendship had today been placed on the balance of life and death itself, and it was

this acting diplomat's duty to add whatever weight he could to Galwyn's side of those scales. Galan just waved his hand at the man in moody response as he had heard it all before, but he studied the man's familiar face again now, appreciating the deep lines of concern and the stress around his eyes, which revealed little hope in their blue depths. The tense body language too spoke volumes of this man's anguish as all knew that any throne challenge was a clash of both tribes in reality, and which calamitous event had sparked many all-out wars between feudal families in the past. This emissary himself was utterly familiar to Galan and his gŵyrd, being a frequent and a popular visitor to Epidia in the normal calendar of events, and he was acquainted with everyone here. Peaceful and respectful trade and even intermarriage had been common between these two eastern and western Galedonian tribes for several generations, and their young and energetic monarchs had become firm friends. Now however, religion was going to drive a wedge between them, one far bigger than the kingdom of the Galedonau which separates them on the ground. It was this worried man's duty to ensure that peaceful relations remained whatever took place on the field of combat shortly, but internecine diplomacy was ever a difficult path to negotiate, a fact not lost on Galan. All Galedon seems to have descended to this rugged and fractured coastline and Galan's resplendent capital fortress, to witness no doubt what the finale of this ominous event would bring, and Galan knew that anything could happen on this fraught day ahead. This was Gŵyr Ieuan's last in a long line of recent and increasingly tense diplomatic missions to DunAdda in an obvious attempt at calming the situation, as the werrin of both tribes had been difficult to contain in these last few days leading up to this potentially cataclysmic event. The two opposing cabals of tribal druids had been entrenched, doing nothing to alleviate the situation and surprising no one. These power-hungry priests did just the opposite with their accusations and counteraccusations, and even the land itself seemed to tremble now in anticipation. Galan was volubly furious with Fachomagia for its self-seeking dissent, and he surveyed this honoured and familiar visiting 'emissary' then with a bleak expression, a

caustic remark on his lips, but he relented, nodding glumly to acting *diplomyydd* leuan and changing the words which finally emerged.

“It’s alright leuan *geiriog*, you can stop sweating needles. Whatever happens here this forlorn day, my gŵyrd have sworn an oath not to perpetuate any notion of sarhaed should I fall. I have insisted that peaceful relations with Fachomagia will continue, and I know your King Galwyn is of similar mind. I understand too that this was not Galwyn’s choice, to whom all know I have been a personal friend for many years. Nor was this deadly throne challenge the desire of his honourable gŵyrd, but the results will remain the same will they not leuan? One Galedonian king must perish here today because some nameless, mead addled old druid had a nightmare?” Galan spat out the complaint, hiding none of his animosity toward the priesthood of Fachomagia, and echoing perhaps his disappointment and his frustration with all Prydein’s religious leaders of late. His druid and his bards stayed silent at the back of this dais at the slur, but their shrouded eyes glittered with the complex emotions of this historic, pivotal day. The painful vacuum left by the passing of HênDdu still felt like a dark and bottomless pit under these priests and all these superstitious northern people, as if the brif-druid’s black portal had been left open at his shocking death. When the brif-druid of all Prydein had been sacrificed by his own brotherhood in Gallia recently it had infuriated the worshipful werrin of these northern highlands when news of it eventually arrived here in high Galedon many weeks later. Treason was suspected of those Galliad priests, but these people’s suspicions had dissipated somewhat when the full report from Aremorica was shared, in that almost all those priests had paid the ultimate price for their folly in the resulting bloodbath on Ynys Trebes. Roman steel had been awash with holy Galliad blood that dark day; the day when Caesar had sailed north in his fleet of conquest, leaving a broken people and a sundered religion in his vast imperial wake. It had been made worse when all the sordid details emerged in that HênDdu had been needlessly slaughtered long after the pivotal moment had passed, due largely to the interminable vicissitudes of that priesthood’s elite and to no effect on Caesar’s departure whatsoever.

Galan's priests looked somewhat shamefaced behind him to these watching warriors, and those white gowned men shuffled their sandaled feet on that platform's boards in the awkward silence which followed this accusation. They remained sensibly and knowledgeably silent in this fraught atmosphere however and with their eyes glinting still, as they knew the unseen stars above them all revolved without end in the heavens, counting down the remaining minutes. Lacking the vision, the wisdom and the guidance of the legendary and irreplaceable HênDdu, these disparate cabals of druids and druidens of northern Prydein had polarised and had begun promoting their own individual interpretations of druidism, often finding themselves in complete opposition and dire competition. Today was a perfect example of the fractured, self-promoting and *politicised* state of the religion currently in these cold and increasingly cynical northern extremes. Acting diplomat Ieuan *geiriog* had no answer to any of this and remained silent in the face of Galan's anger, knowing himself that there was very little he could have done anyway as the druids had already decided today's procedure. The forlorn look on Ieuan's long face at that moment gave sight to the heartbreak he was feeling, and this was shared by everyone in this great hall, as all here knew too that time had run out for him and for his fated King Galwyn. For once, 'wordy' Ieuan was lost for words, but his blushes were saved by tall bronze horns which blew long and stark into the cold air outside, and Ieuan paled visibly at this sorrowful lament.

The portentous lamentation of those long bronze horns carried far and wide, echoing for miles down the length of the cold and grey sea loch dividing this ancient land. Many who had gathered to witness this historic event shivered at this melancholic lowing; a forlorn, haunting sound which seemed to sum up the gloomy mood of these deeply worried people here today. The black flags and colourful banners on the high battlements competed wildly, flapping boisterously in the stiffening wind as these royals, aristocrats and lords all left the confines and the warmth of Galan's great hall to this strident blaring. They gathered in their furs in the wide expanse of DunAdda's interior, surrounded by its tall, palisaded walls and

the majestic, curving panorama of the distant and snow draped highlands around it. The huge and age blackened main gates were thrown wide open, and the werrin could be seen crowding the gatehouse and the causeway leading up to it, all the way along the fortified *sarn* and back to both approaches of the gravel shoreline. As the pivotal moment loomed, all around the harbour and the riverside part of the town had condensed into an excited crowd as the strident outpouring of those bronze horns continued to wash over them all. This gathering swelled noticeably as it moved through the town and as the taverns emptied, their drunken patrons joining this moving mass of people all heading for the timber sarn to these blaring notes. Their loud and drunken behaviour swelled noticeably too, and these jostling people choked the land approach, filled the slatted timber causeway and crowded the open gatehouse now, all garrulous in anticipation but held back by a strong rope and several armed guards. A pensive silence fell on that multitude then and as the tones from those bronze horns faded into a leaden silence, and this tense, building sense of anticipation gripped all within this great caer. The nobles began to shuffle forward to surround the central parade ground and to where the druids were already setting up their ceremonial rites, placing today's prize on their temporary altar for all to see. Galedon's *llath y gallu gwyn* was an ancient thing of true and intrinsic beauty, but the identity of its master creator had been lost in the impenetrable mists of a time long passed. The heavy silver cap at either end of the glistening white, reed long rod was deeply sculpted into the front half of a proud stag, both of which were crowned with a set of twelve-point antlers. Not only was it a stunning piece of the rarest art, but it was also priceless and irreplaceable. Facing forever away from each other, these twin silver stag's magnificent manes both parted down the middle and then draped over the pair of muscular legs at each end, on which this sacred 'white rod of power' rested in all its power and glory. The preserved white rod of ash these fabulous silver finials encapsulated had also been sculpted and carved in the same mystical, whirling design and its ancient coelbren runes of legitimacy, and it sat resplendent on the druid's altar now,

catching the sunlight and reminding all what this day was about. The druids had taken the time to delineate a huge combat arena around the prize on their altar by encircling it with a great ring of white quartz stones thirty paces across, and they twinkled pleasingly now in this weak morning sunlight.

All five, major tribes of Galedon were here present along with the dozens of minor families making up the highland alliance, and all had assembled to witness the claiming of that ancient and stunning white rod of power and to see who it was that would rule them and take the federation forward. Even the legendary Gŵyr Brith Fawr of the Gadwyr had made a celebrated appearance along with his ghost-warrior comrade Olwydd Hîr. Crown Prince Cadwy ap Cridas of Selgofa and Albion had once again led his distraught and heavily pregnant wife north over the now open border. Following a difficult second trek to this tortured western coast, this grieving royal couple along with their Albion gŵyrd were now gathered on a balustraded stone terrace sheltering below the weather-beaten face of DunAdda's huge inner keep, overlooking its broad maes and in an exclusive place of honour. Cadwy and a black draped Eirwen had taken their places in two throne-like chairs on this terrace, and they now looked sad, detached but magnificent among their glimmering lords, who were taking no more chances and were arrayed in a tight circle of protective steel and blue wool around them both.

As soon as the druids' stewards had removed their masters' altar from the combat arena using two long poles and the white rod was secured among their linen clad ranks, a single blast on a priest's deer horn was sounded harsh and high into the grey sky above. Before the hoary stones of DunAdda's ancient keep and below these noble spectators on its lichen encrusted veranda, six champions of Epidia led by their infamous Captain Sel broke from their comrades and made King Galan's personal guard, as half a dozen Fachomagian pencampwyr did much the same from the opposite side. The two royal combatants were now dressed casually and loosely for individual combat, both standing to another reedy note from a

druid's horn, and the tension on the faces of all those men around them was now apparent.

As both parties sombrely approached the great white circle of shining stones on the ground from opposite directions, symbolically from east and west, a loud clatter of horses' hooves was heard on the paved ramp outside. Scattering the loudly protesting and drunken werrin crowding the causeway, a royal party of late arrivals came thundering up the gangway and barged rudely into the throng crowding that gatehouse, causing an uproar. These bold horsemen pushed their way through that drunken melee and jumped the rope holding back those werrin, ignoring the gate guards protestations. They came clattering to a rude and sudden halt at the edge of the interior parade ground in a flurry of snowy sand, and all eyes were drawn to the young aristocrat who vaulted off the first foam slathered horse. This fit looking noble was recognised instantly by his Tawescally countrymen, but being *vassa/* and absent for some time this energetic young man was clearly unknown to the masses. This infamous prince had left Galedon some years ago, to seek his fortune down south apparently as so many disillusioned northern youngsters had over the years.

'Cydwal ap Conal has come for his kingdom!' Was the excited declaration on the Tawescally werrin's lips who were present, and then breathlessly passed about like a parcel of smoked meat: 'Cydwal ap Conal has come for his kingdom!'

There was a flurry of movement in the northern corner of this Epidian fortress at this abrupt and rude arrival, and under some very famous banners. The '*perched-wren-on-winged-dagger*' cygil of Lleu Llaw Gyffes was known the length and breadth of this land, but the largest of the supporting minor flags around it, and which was hurriedly lifted into place now was a new and contentious one bearing a '*vixen-pierced-with-winged-dagger*' cygil. This graphic illustration of Conal's defeat was thought by some to be purposely controversial and designed not only to announce Lleu's embarrassing and notorious defeat of Conal, but also to declare

Dylan's ownership by conquest of his DunAer. It was hurriedly brought forward by Lleu's *wren* officers perhaps to elicit an unthinking reaction here today, or some other foreseen day in the future. This new banner's stark symbolism and its bold proclamation was not lost on this late arrival, especially when Cydwal saw the detail in Dylan's provocative new flag among the other banners being gathered in that corner. He lost his composure and stormed toward the Wenyllon camp, arrayed as it was in splendour below the palisaded north corner watchtower.

Standing tall and aloof under his assembled banners, Lleu looked splendid but grave at his son's side, and he brushed aside his bristling pencampwr at Cydwal's approach and stepped up to meet the young prince himself, who was visibly furious.

"*Draen-dur-hoer!* My family's sword. Who has it?" Cydwal demanded loudly, thoughtlessly breaking the druid's circle with a misplaced footstep, but he was clearly past caring.

Lleu looked for a moment as though he was about to pass a glib remark, but a shift in his blazing blue eyes bespoke the change in his mind, and he relaxed, becoming languid as he stepped up to this furious young prince, whose father he had personally and legally killed in a *sarhaed* of his father's own choosing.

"I have your sword Cydwal ap Conal and it has been well cared for!" He told him casually, looking down his aristocratic nose at this young prince before signalling an awaiting squire, one who had been hurriedly given the sword by a gŵyr of Lleu's *wrens*. This serious young *macwy* in the ubiquitous green tabard of his position stepped forward and presented Cydwal with his heirloom long sword with a curt bow. This smooth gesture seemed to take the wind out of this young man's sails momentarily, but his anger could not be ignored nor placated so easily, and so Cydwal grabbed the sword and turned on Lleu.

"I am here too for my other family possessions and my inheritance; my caer and my lands; my kingdom!" He demanded hotly, and Lleu stiffened.

“You, the all-powerful sons of Beli Mawr cannot curb your greed can you? It’s like a sickness with all of you! Was my father’s humble caer so vital to your vast estates that you had to slay him to take it?” Cydwal charged Lleu recklessly, his voice rising with the obvious emotion in his accusation, and there were many gasps from this surrounding crowd at his rashness. He looked wildly around at these spectators now, perhaps in search of support, but if anyone here did support his claim they stayed silent as with the legendary warriors involved in this quickly escalating debacle it was more than their lives were worth to voice it.

“Your father was a scurrilous, oath-breaking rogue, and if King Lleu hadn’t disposed of him like a rank amateur that day I would have removed his lying head myself!” Their host King Galan erupted, roaring at Cydwal with his war face emerging finally and revealing perhaps the stress he was under this day. Galan took an ominous step forward, but Lleu put his hand up with a discreet nod, forestalling the Epidian king’s outrage. This cool Wenyllon monarch quickly forestalled Cydwal then too and by stepping up smartly and tightly gripping his sword arm, as it was clear that this angry young man was about to draw the blade in response to Galan’s tirade.

“Don’t be a bloody fool!” Lleu growled at him and with his blue eyes sparking dangerously only inches away, stopping his hand. “Galan is the king of Epidia boy, and he is here for a sacred throne challenge which you cannot interrupt or interfere with in any way, on pain of a shitty death at the hands of mad priests as you well know!” Lleu held his angry gaze with his own, and he forced Cydwal to listen and to look at him from sheer willpower, but this young man’s fury was now overflowing, and he would not be calmed. Cydwal threw off Lleu’s hand, but his sword remained sheathed, for now.

“My quarrel is not with Epidia, but with your Wenyllon!” Cydwal roared back at them all, ignoring the red-faced Galan, and refocusing his anger, pointing out Lleu and his murderous looking gŵyrd, who were all staring daggers back at him from under their banners. “I am no boy, and I have come here to claim what is my birthright to claim; the sarhaed of mortal

combat!" He yelled this at Lleu, his voice breaking with the emotions coursing through him now and flushing his face. In confirmation, Cydwal tore *Draen-dur-hoer* from its scabbard finally, and the polished beauty of 'Cold-steel-thorn' glittered as it caught the sunlight, making the breath catch in many an onlooker's throat from its stark and deadly promise. The sound that ushered from this crowd was one of surprised but suppressed excitement as Cydwal levelled the fabulous blade at this impressive Wenyllon monarch, but it faded in that same cold heartbeat into an apprehensive silence. The tension rose alarmingly in all these onlookers now, as Lleu's handsome face had turned to stone in that same hair-raising instant.

"I will answer your sarhaed *boy!*" This stylish king growled menacingly in response to his raw challenge, and a dangerous blue light fired deep in those cleaving, cerulean eyes.

Cydwal looked hard back at Lleu and he sneered, ignoring the repeated insult and possessing the experience to know its purpose, as he had used the ruse himself many times to infuriate an opponent into a rash and unconsidered attack. Glancing down at the infamous and bejewelled dagger at his right hip and with which this ostentatious man had slain his father, Cydwal smirked again. "Yes, you would Lord Lleu, of that I am sure! Anything to prevent your precious son and heir risking *his* skinny neck! And I know you would love to finally make your sacred *triad* of Tawescally noble heads here this day, would you not King Lleu ap Rianaw?" Cydwal challenged him boldly, and Lleu blanched. He became suddenly very still in that dangerous way of his, drawing every wide eye in this crowd, but this embittered Tawescally prince was remorseless. "No, I claim my sarhaed from your bookish puppy Dylan! It was he who arrogantly took possession of DunAer; my caer for himself when you slew my father for him, was it not?" Cydwal blustered on, looking around himself for support once again, and a few were nodding now as this was a widely known truth. Since the fall of Conal's hilltop caer, Dylan's gŵyrd had not shied from boastful gloating, the kind of alehouse bragging which

had not gone unnoticed in certain parts of Galedon. Dylan looked pale and fearful one pace behind his father, but the harsh planes of his pinched young face were set. They gave insight perhaps to a determination and a realisation, both born no doubt from expectation of this very event, and Dylan reached out to touch his father's arm.

"You cannot deny his challenge tad, and we both knew this day could come." Dylan reminded his father soberly. Lleu's expression in response was unfathomable, and he surveyed his young son and his only heir now with a bleak look.

Dylan was a fine student with a quick and receptive mind, delighting all his tutors apart from two. Well in advance of his years in all the academic subjects, his son was found to be a superb linguist and a highly creative poet, gaining a growing reputation among the current crop of revivalists. Not counting himself, the only mentors his son had repeatedly disappointed throughout his young life had been his two venerated martial masters, as although his heir was a noble issue to the greatest Brythonic swordsman ever to have stalked this earth, Beli Mawr's great-grandson was no natural fighter. He had struggled all his life with the tools of warfare and given a free hand Dylan would never choose to pick up a weapon. They held no mystique for him, a sword being just another tool. Perceived as being perhaps more priestly than princely, Dylan ap Lleu ap Rianaw was far happier playing his harp and singing or reciting his latest poem in Latin or Greek to his equally studious group of friends than he ever was sweating on the '*maes y cledd*', and it made poor preparation for the cruel demands of this cold day. Lleu hid his deep and growing concerns for Dylan as although his skills with the sword had improved dramatically as he attained manhood, he had never been a *gifted* swordsman regardless of the dragon's blood coursing through his veins, and unusually, Dylan had no love of combat. This had taken Lleu by surprise in those early years, but Dylan had proved that he had so much more to offer than the brute force ability to kill other men over those same enlightening years. His burgeoning intellect and his grasp of

national politics was astonishing already, but Lleu spat to the cold parade ground of DunAdda now, knowing that none of that mattered this morning. Dylan was about to be tested on how much he had learned at the sword post, and his very life now depended on it. Lleu turned and nodded to Cydwal then, taking a deliberate backward step to signify his withdrawal. Lleu bowed curtly to this enraged young prince and then turned his back on him to face his own son once more. The challenger behind him; Cydwal ap Conal was no student of the arts, that much was evident to all just from his ripe language. Those who knew the family well had not been surprised when this adolescent prince had flown that particularly dysfunctional nest. Lleu knew that he had lived a hard and a fast life down south, apparently making his dubious name around the mean streets of LludsDun with his sword. He had earned much gold from his efforts by all accounts, most of which was earned the hard way; the iron way. Lleu held his son's gaze for long moments now, aping a relaxed, calm attitude and with an easy smile playing on his lips, utterly denying the mushrooming turmoil he felt within.

"You know what to do Dylan as you've had the very finest tutors, so believe in yourself son. Empty your mind and leave all outside the arena. You must squeeze every ounce of mercy from your heart as make no mistake my son, that young rogue has come here to *kill* you!" Lleu's eyes bored into Dylan's at that crucial, pivotal moment, and he was buoyed by what he saw in them. He saw no fear, just the dragon's fire igniting deep in his son's identical blue eyes, and they blazed back at him now with an elemental, inbred flame which was so familiar and thrilling to Lleu, it caused his heart to gallop.

"I am ready father. I will fight with all my strength and all my wits for the honour of my family and for all Wenyllon, but mostly father for you!" Dylan growled, and although his painfully young and unblemished face was pale, there was no trace of bluster on it. Nor was there any hint of performance in the gravel of his words, and Lleu swelled with pride.

“For Arglwydd Camulo, Beli Mawr and for the glory of Wenyllon!” Lleu snarled the oath for them both as he clasped Dylan’s hand, before enveloping him roughly in a bearlike and paternal embrace. “Gut the common little toad Dylan and make your taid and your hêndaïd smile on their Underworld thrones!” Lleu growled this in his ear before releasing him, and a pale Dylan turned to face his fate.

The druids were flapping about like fox spooked geese, squawking about what took precedence over what, but Cydwal ap Conal decided the issue by stepping into the combat circle properly and striding into the centre of the arena, pointing Dylan out.

“Dylan ap Lleu of Wenyllon!” He roared. “I challenge you to the royal sarhaed of mortal combat, for your presumption and your greed in taking what was not yours to take. My DunAer! So, come out from behind the legs of your famous father and face a real swordsman, if you dare!” Cydwal added with a sneer, slashing Tawescally’s sword around himself, confirming his intentions here today in no uncertain terms. Dylan responded, striding purposefully into the glittering circle of this arena, and the sound swelled from the crowd around them as he drew *Grafangau-yr-eryr* with a sibilant *whoosh*. ‘Eagle’s-claw’ glittered in this weak sunlight with its malevolent promise as Dylan’s inherited long sword was infamous and its legend manifest, being a *Penderyn* blade of the very finest quality.

As an angry and usurped Galan stumped back to his campaign chair below the white stallion banners, shaking his head, the experienced Epidian gŵyr around him exchanged dark and knowing looks. They were in privileged positions, and they knew that if Cydwal ap Conal defeats Dylan ap Lleu here today and reclaims his caer and his lands, the look on their king’s face at that moment told them that this reckless young prince’s troubles would just be beginning.

Dylan was just as bloodless and worried looking as he parried the first furious onslaught of the enraged Cydwal, but his technique and footwork were sound and so he was able to survive this initial attack. Dylan’s

superb training was countering Cydwal's ferocity largely, and his face no longer had that haunted expression about it, just the serious and sharply focused look it bore when at his studies. Lleu's pride was overflowing as he watched with bated breath, his hopes and aspirations for Dylan mounting steadily as his boy put up a tremendous fight. That breath caught sharply in his throat a heartbeat later and as Dylan was struck a savage blow, high across his chest as he moved a fraction late to parry, and it sounded like the crack of a stockman's whip. Having had no time to dress his son in the *morddyl* vest before the bout, Lleu feared the worst, and the shocking sound which echoed around DunAdda painfully pierced his very soul. Standing rigid he groaned inwardly as his son fell, Eagle's-claw flying from numb fingers, and Lleu's spirits tumbled with it into a dark and bottomless pit of anguish, weakening his legs. Lleu's heart and his chest seemed to be gripped painfully and suddenly by the clawed hand of some inner monster, and a savage roar erupted from the crowd around him, matching his escalating agony as Dylan hit the ground in the centre of that white circle, and he hit it hard. This rushing and swelling sound swirling around him was a raw mixture of surprise, anger, joy, and an undisguised bloodlust, and it made his head spin. Amid this dizzying bedlam of raised voices and with stark eyes, Lleu saw that young Cydwal was standing over his fallen son and his face was flushed with his victory. Torn in two by the compulsion to rush out there and slaughter that ruffian and by his overpowering honour which forbade it, Lleu stood fast to witness the certain and violent death of his only beloved child with his heart breaking.

From the grainy and sandy dirt of DunAdda's cold earth, Dylan struggled to contain the white-hot agony which blazed across his chest and his left shoulder. The blow had totally immobilised the arm, and he felt as though he was drowning now as his chest had locked up tight and he could not draw a breath to save his life at that shocking moment. Feeling the hot flow of his blood running down his quivering ribs and soaking his undershirt, his eyes were swimming. Looking up, Dylan saw through his

shimmering vision that a flushed Cydwal was standing over him, *crowing* with delight and holding his sword high.

“I, Crown Prince Cydwal ap Conal ap Cynal ap Conan Fawr of Tawescally, I claim back my father’s throne, his caer and all his lands!” He yelled hoarsely above him, spittle flying from his ragged lips at the hysterical oath, and as their eyes met, Cydwal’s were wild with his triumph as he stood over him.

Dylan roused himself and shook his head, throwing the droplets of sweat from his eyes and fighting against this debilitating pain which tore through his upper torso and down his left side like a hot lance. Cydwal bent to run him through and to finish this fight, but Dylan still had his *right* arm.

“Say hello to Lug Ddu you *ratling*, for I now send you over the bridge of sw....uh?” Cydwal’s fiercely grinning victory speech was abruptly interrupted and by the merest *chinc* of sound, as Dylan had moved like a snake beneath him. Inspired by his father in all things and with a downward grip of his dagger, he had parried the clumsy and over-confident, downward thrust of *Draen-dur-hoer* toward his heart in a flash. Dylan just as swiftly then plunged his blade backhanded and right up to the cross guard into Cydwal’s right eye, just as he was bending forward into it.

“Just like your fat fool of a father!” Dylan growled, the leather grip of the dagger flying from his fingers as Cydwal was propelled violently away from him by the savage killing stroke. Tawescally’s orphaned sword made a harsh sound as it clattered to the ground, landing dead centre of this sparkling white circle of destiny and with its tip pointing directly at the victor, trembling slowly now into a profound stillness. “You talk too much!” Dylan finished the insult with a snarl, and he fell back with a deep sigh. Propped up onto one elbow, his blue eyes were blazing as he watched the already dead Cydwal kick and spasm on this parade ground and with his bejewelled dagger still vibrating in his skull.

Cydwal ap Conal had been killed instantly by Dylan's legendary father's infamous stroke 'the peck of the wren', and the surrounding crowd were going crazy. With a frenetic resumption of the manic drumming and the loud bronze horns blaring again, Dylan felt suddenly lightheaded and quite sick, his vision fading into white nothingness.

Crown Prince Dylan had won his bout of mortal combat, ending Tawescally's ancient blood line forever. He had secured a kingdom for himself and had also earned the title of *tywysog*, in which fight was deemed his 'barn-isarno', confirming him as a Brythonic 'warrior prince'. Rising finally to manhood by winning his 'iron-trial', *Tywysog* Dylan was added to the sacred *Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion o Prydein*, and he became listed there among the vaunted descendants of the great Beli Mawr himself. All he had to do now was to survive this terrible wound. As this senseless noise washed over an unseeing Dylan along with the pain, careful and loving hands reached him, lifting him up from the hard earth. The last thing brave Dylan heard before he succumbed was his tad's proud voice.

By late afternoon, a deeply sombre atmosphere had fallen on all these people from the sad chain of events they had witnessed on this *day of days* and on this sandy parade ground of DunAdda. A forlorn Galan had vanquished an entirely disinterested Galwyn, and many here thought the young Fachomagian king was so distraught at having to fight a lifelong friend and mentor, he had gone to the bridge of swords willingly as not long into the fight, Galan had removed his head cleanly and without any celebration. In fact, at the very point of Galwyn's death when all the Gods were sure to be watching, a profound and awestruck silence had fallen heavily on all these people. Their conjoined memories of this sad but pivotal event would surely endure to their own deaths as its impact had been evident on all their pale faces. Many stunned witnesses were also forced to consider that there was a measure of protest against his own avaricious priests perhaps in Galwyn's patent lack of desire to win the fight, but whatever his motivations, there was a decidedly sacrificial feel

to King Galwyn of Fachomagia's sad demise. However blood-soaked and fraught this day had proved, the very balance of power across all Galedon had been decided here, and it had laid to rest many of the werrins' fears for the future.

The taverns and the beer tents were bursting to capacity as a freezing night descended on this highland, coastal territory. The singing was loud and boisterous, drifting with the icy wind down this dark and freezing loch along with one low and speeding black cormorant.



Chapter Eight.

DunRheadr was bedecked in flags, bunting and flowers for the grand occasion and even the sun had returned to make a warming appearance, causing a glorious and portentous double rainbow to arch over the western tower and the baby's lodgings. These vibrant bows of elemental splendour were suspended in the air amid the myriad droplets of water cascading from the adjacent river. This watery haze reached out in billowing clouds from a crashing cataract in the nearby rushing waters of the Tÿs. These twin rainbows then splashed against the flag adorned western watchtower of DunRheadr, leaving it awash with the vivacious palette of this sudden afternoon sunshine. The noise that ushered from the gathered werrin in the town below carried all the way up and over these colourfully haloed battlements, competing with the constant booming from the savage torrent nearby. The foaming river Tÿs lay mere reeds away from this corner of the huge Bregantan fortress, whose enormous twin gates had been thrown wide open this day. The kings, princes, and the leaders of all the tribes of Breged were present, and so the procedure had to be carried out on the grand maes before the keep, which made up the sweeping eastern sector of this fortress' long cleared approaches. Everything was in place, and Princess Regent Morwena had overseen every single detail, wearing her servants and her slaves thin with her constant demands. It was obvious at a glance that an absolute fortune had been spent on this celebration, not least for this exclusive and rope-fenced royal banquet before the caer. There had been the huge feast for the werrin in the town to organise, and the vast quantity of alcohol for that alone had required an eye watering sum in silver coin. The commotion from that rowdy feast below carried clearly up to this great maes on the breeze, confirming that Morwena's coin had been wisely spent. The tables for this enclosed *royal*/ banquet had been laid out in

long, linen draped rows on the great maes before this fortress and could easily accommodate the hundreds of aristocratic guests expected. More than three hundred personal gifts had been designed and commissioned by this busy and highly committed young lady for her noble guests. These had been placed upon the correct piece of linen tablecloth on these many tables and beside the little stand with its horizontal coelbren stick, each bearing the name of the seat holder and the recipient of one of these lovely favours. These gifts ranged from beautiful kid gloves to stoles, mantles, and all manner of beautiful and well-made items, all of which she knew her guests would appreciate. As Morwena looked around at the gathering royals and nobles in this exclusive and guarded sector, the raucous racket from the town below made her smile, as the many gallons of fresh barley beer she had sent down this morning on a convoy of ox carts were obviously being well received by their hard-working subjects on this day of celebration and a day of no work for many. Only one thing remained to complete all these preparations for the celebration of her daughter's *founding*, and every soul in this vibrant caer, the broad and beautifully draped maes below it and cramming the streets of the adjacent tref joined Morwena to await *his* arrival with a keen anticipation.

A large timber stage had been erected at the head of this cropped and well-tended maes, and this beautifully made construction made of tight-fitting boards of polished beech had been bedecked in an ocean of waxed white linen and built around a raised central podium. A beautifully sculpted and painted column of oak arose from the dressed and equally polished timbers at the heart of this podium and would support baby Bellicca in her wicker bower for the procedure to come. The royal infant will be *centre stage* in all senses for this holy foundation declaration and her forthcoming dedication to Arglwydd Brigida. Horns blared abruptly from the south, and excitement gripped all these people now, many of the werrin around the fringes of the market town surging up the main north-south road toward the distant treeline in joyous response to this ancient call to arms, as it was clear that their high king had finally arrived. From this high window opening, Morwena's eyes flew with those diminutive

figures to the distant treeline, and her pulse quickened. 'Bellnor had come!' Her *chwegrún* had obviously relented and had risen above the recent bickering between himself and his son to attend his granddaughter's sacred rite of foundation. A frisson of excitement coursed through her, and she realised that their plans could finally be put into action. Morwena hoped and prayed to all her Gods that today would finally draw a line under recent family hostilities and close this rift between father and son, once and for all.

The ceremony had gone without hitch, and little Bellicca had screamed her lungs ragged throughout the sacred procedure, to the chagrin of all the druids as they had to shout their prayers ignominiously and at the tops of their voices just to be heard over the roaring of the apoplectic royal infant. It caused much humour among the aristocratic audience but precious little in the priesthood. The venison had been cooked to perfection and the wine was from Italy, so the rows of flushed faces were happy, many commenting on the excellence of the provisions. Bellnor had made a fine effort at the wonderful food and drink on offer, looking pleased and effusive at the centre of the top table, and he had been gregarious throughout. Among the gifts set out before the king on this royal table sat a small two-gallon oak cask, and Bellnor had been eyeing it all afternoon, knowing well what it contained as the mysterious markings burned into its timbers were familiar to him. Although it had been many years since he had sampled a proper vintage *swyn y gwynt*, Bellnor recognised this small wooden barrel for what it was; two gallons of pure, magical nectar, and in the high king of Bregeð's considered personal opinion, it was rarer than dragon's piss. 'Sound of the wind' was the famed and much lauded honey liquor of one Myrddun *yr ogof*, the long dead alchemist and master distiller who had kept his liquor in oak barrels, just like this one. These he stored in the bowels of a deep and draughty cave system, hidden away in the nearby lands of the much-reduced Tectoferdi tribe, many years ago and long past living memory. His *wirod-mywyd*, or 'spirit-of-life' as the Prydeinig called their beloved liquor had become legendary, earning that wily old distiller a small fortune. However,

his very finest vintage was known as 'swyn y gwynt', and this precious spirit was so wonderfully delicious and so delightfully pure it was thought to have been touched by the Gods themselves. The Tectoferdi were known throughout Prydein as master beekeepers and their honey was hugely popular with the werrin of all Breganta. Myrddun Ogof had sought out these bee masters, as the liquid gold their minions produced was uniquely flavoured by the heather and the wildflowers which festoon the broad downs nearby and which occupy the heartland of this north midland territory.

As the chatter and the noise of this banquet washed over Bellnor, his gaze fell on the aged barrel once more, and his thoughts returned to Tectoferdi history and to old Myrddun Ogof's long lost underground distillery...

With the liquid gold of Tectoferdi's bees secured, Myrddun began by building a fine reputation across this region for producing the purest *medd-melys*. His more powerful *medd-tanllys* became hugely popular with the warrior class shortly thereafter, and Myrddun then gathered the profits from selling his excellent meads, investing it into another avenue of income and the further distillation of his exceptional produce. Soon, his honey *liquor* became equally famous, especially his finest work *swyn y gwynt*, for which the aristocracy would pay an exorbitant price such was its reputation. Myrddun had died in his early sixties without issue or a subordinate to run the distillery, and so his caves had become abandoned. Those caves had been raided and most of his stock stolen soon after his death from some mysterious illness to his inner organs, and so Tectoferdi lost their master distiller. However, that cave system was reportedly such a dangerous warren, rumours were rife about great undiscovered reserves of honey liquor hidden away in dark corners and ageing beautifully. Even a great pile of lost *swyn y gwynt* was conjured up by eternally thirsty Brythons, and warriors and bards alike would retell the old tale with relish across Prydein, especially on those long and cold nights when the warm mead was all gone. This had all happened more than two hundred years ago, making a *real* barrel of *swyn y gwynt* an exceptionally rare thing

indeed. Bellnor had thought they were all long gone, but this one had somehow survived, and by some miracle his daughter-in-law had managed to procure it for him. There were many counterfeits these days depressingly, a sad development in recent years and across many industries. Bellnor could tell by these rare markings however that this was the real thing, as it was in the original barrel and clearly one handmade by the master himself. It promised untold delights from its incredible age and Bellnor could not wait to taste it. His pleasure deepened with anticipation as he looked again at the indecipherable marks burned into its ancient timbers, and he salivated a little in expectancy. Looking around, he even nodded and smiled across to his son, who returned it to his credit, and it seemed as if this exciting and God's blessed day was having a soothing and conciliatory effect on all. The king glanced across at Morwena then, appreciating now the efforts his daughter-in-law had made, realising that she was a very accomplished hostess, flitting here and there and organising everything, always industrious. He was forced to revise his opinion of her, as without her tireless efforts to make this celebration a complete success and her determined reaching out to him, he would probably not have come, even as he knew it would have driven a wedge between him and Cartysman that no amount of diplomacy could ever have withdrawn. Now however it seems that his son's new wife's persistence has paid off, as this had been a truly wonderful celebration. His beautiful granddaughter had stolen everyone's hearts, in the short periods of calm between the raging bouts of bedlam which issued from her. This whole maes was relaxing now into this warm and memorable day, and Bellnor's great shoulders sagged, the knots of tension finally unravelling, and he beamed back at the rows of flushed but smiling faces before him.

Gŵyr Eidyn and his burly, grey-haired comrade Gŵyr Cydwas, both wealthy Bregantan lords bowed their heads and smiled thinly in return to the high king's nod of recognition from their long side table, but then they eyed each other nervously. Both remained silent among the chatter,

Cydwas' head dropping, and Eidyn too lowered his gaze as the moment must surely be upon them.

The *adlonnwr* was no mere Jester, even as he dressed and performed as a well-known one across this country. This uncommon man was among the very best 'sleight of hand' merchants in all Prydein, and Morwena had spent much silver in getting this famous magician here today for this happy event. Bellnor roared with laughter as the man with the elusive hands produced a fully inflated pig's bladder in front of him and seemingly out of thin air. Morwena watched her *chwegrun* carefully and was thrilled that Bellnor was enjoying himself so much. He had been so kind to her earlier, praising her for the excellence of the feast and thanking her sincerely for her efforts in creating such a spectacular success in the *founding* of his granddaughter's spiritual honour, even shaking hands and embracing Cartysman before throwing his arms about them both. Although Prince Cartysman had stood a little rigid at first, the cheering of all the noble guests had seemed to soften his attitude, and blushing furiously, he too had relented, returning the embrace and making the smiles break out everywhere.

A bunch of flowers appeared as if by magic under the king's nose then and he roared with laughter again, his elbow resting in confirmed ownership of the ancient barrel of honey liquor. Morwena was compelled to go to him in his joy, and sliding her arms around his great muscular shoulders, she hugged him, smiling as he patted the back of her hand.

"He's very good Morwena! Wherever did you find him?" He asked her, his eyes sparkling from under those bushy, grey shot eyebrows and echoing his laughter.

"I will send him to you after the feast *father*, and he can tickle your ribs in private for a week or two!" She offered with a mischievous smile and Bellnor nodded in agreement, flipping the performer a whole gold coin.

The man's eyes grew huge, but the coin vanished in thin air and once again the applause was loud. The Jester bowed deeply to Bellnor, but

when he arose a moment later he was wearing a completely different coloured shirt, and the high king of Breged was astounded, standing to lead the cheering. As if in afterthought, Bellnor turned and bent to Morwena.

“And where on this green earth did you find this barrel of swyn y gwynt?” He queried with an astonished expression, but his canny daughter in law was not forthcoming and she tapped the side of her nose with a finger, an enigmatic smile playing around her lips. At a nod from her, a steward approached with a mallet and pin, and she leaned closer to her father-in-law as he retook his seat.

“To be quite honest *father*, I know not where it comes from, but a merchant offered it for sale and so I bought it for you. I have noticed that you haven’t been able to take your eyes from our little gift, so I have brought a steward to tap it, and so that you can sample it now. I know you’re *dying* to taste it!” She whispered this softly in his ear and with that enduring, enigmatic smile of hers. Bellnor needed little persuasion and was clearly delighted at her continued thoughtfulness, nodding to the steward, and finally relinquishing his precious new gift.

With one practised blow of his mallet, this burly steward drove a small spigot into the barrel, instantly replacing the bung with this rudimentary tap, and the man stood the barrel back upright on the table carefully in front of the king before bowing deeply and retreating. Bellnor’s mouth salivated sharply in anticipation as an arwein approached with a glass wrapped in a linen cloth. The liquor was musical on pouring, and as it was tipped carefully into a beautiful, imported drinking glass by this nervous arwein, Bellnor could hardly contain himself. When handed the glass with a deep and formal bow by this servant, the contents were so pale the mead was almost clear, but when he held it up to the sunlight, subtle tones of honey and autumn gold were revealed in its mysterious depths. To Bellnor’s sophisticated nose, the bouquet of heather and wild blooms came alive on his olfactory palette, and he breathed its fumes in deeply, glorying in its complex but sweet aromas which promised so much. The

king stretched out this moment of pure and personal pleasure, taking the time to appreciate where this nectar had come from, and what this small barrel of swyn y gwynt must have survived to be here this day. The sounds around him faded, being replaced by the arrival of a curious and melodic wind, whose subtle and somewhat melancholic tones drifted toward an enraptured Bellnor from somewhere in the trees around this clearing. With narrowed and glittering eyes, the king considered the contents of this glass' venerable age and the unique individual who had brought it into this world, and he revelled in the keen sense of anticipation which gripped him now. The first sip did not disappoint. In fact, it delighted him and it stimulated his tastebuds, making his eyes roll upwards as the aged liquor washed over his tongue and all his celebrating senses. It was even more delicious than anticipated, and Bellnor smacked his lips, nodding and smiling his appreciation to Morwena, but as he did this he detected a slight oiliness on his lips, and it had no business being there. As he licked this unexpected and unctuous film from his lips with a frown, Morwena's face was inscrutable and her eyes unfathomable at that breath catching moment. The melodious, ghostly whispering of this curious wind and the noise from the hundreds of guests in this enclosure became strangely hollow to Bellnor's ears in that instant, and his heart began to beat a little differently in his chest, which suddenly felt tight and gave him an alarming twinge.

Morwena's heart was hammering uncontrollably and try as she might to keep her expression neutral and her breathing normal, she knew that her eyes would be blazing, so she watched with a rising pulse as the look on Bellnor's face turned to one of horrified realisation. He did not utter one word, but he grabbed at his neck as his throat and his face began to swell before her eyes. Rearing up from his chair with a crash and with both clawed hands scrabbling at his throat, Bellnor's face began to bloat and to discolour in front of her and before all these horrified people. With an even louder crash, Bellnor collapsed onto the table in front of him, scattering everything whilst thrashing and kicking against some terrible and unseen, *inner* enemy. To the lowing sound of this melancholic wind blowing

ominously through these linen canopies, High King Bellnor ap Bellety of Breged publicly began choking to death. The sounds of celebration instantly turned to screams and terrified cries of despair as their high king thrashed in his agony on the head table, scattering crockery as he drew his own blood, scraping the skin from his swollen neck in long red furrows with his fingernails. At the far end of this long table Cartysman's face was a mask of horror-filled shock, and he ran to his father, the astonishment clear on his young face. The fear rang true in his words too as he screamed for meddygs and porters.

"Tad!" Cartysman howled as he reached Bellnor, and he gripped his right arm tightly as his father thrashed in his agony. Every soul watching with their mouths hanging were convinced of Cartysman's total shock at this savage assault on his father the king and which had clearly been brought on by some monstrous poison in that ancient liquor. No one could tear their harrowed eyes from the dreadful scene playing out before them, but it was clear to all that nobody could act or perform that kind of complete horror with such truth, nor could anyone falsify the shock which drained all the blood from this son's harrowed face. To all these shocked people and even a few grisly, utterly cynical warlords, Cartysman's tragic wailing at his father's side was totally convincing.

Morwena smiled inwardly at this devastation to her husband, even as her face shared the tragic shock of his loss. She rushed to his side and clung to him, wringing the mock tears from her own eyes as Cartysman wept real tears beside her in his terrible anguish. Morwena knew her husband for what he really was; a weak and deeply spoiled individual, and although he was co-conspirator in this deadly plan, he expected his father to take the poisoned barrel home and be notified of his father's sad demise remotely by messenger and in a few days' time. That way lay deep suspicion, and Morwena knew intuitively that murdering the king in the bright glare of a public engagement although shocking was less suspicious somehow and opened the field in a way, but she knew too that Cartysman would never have been able to do what needed to be done here today.

Had he known what was about to happen and the horror which would surely ensue, his guilt would have been written across his narrow face for all to see. She had orchestrated it this way precisely to get this honest and truly shocked reaction from her husband, as by intuition or some learned sense of peril, Morwena feared that if this worst of all crimes were to ever come out into the open, everything she had worked for would be lost. Her own life and that of her baby's would also surely be lost should she be found complicit in any way. So, as shocking and as horrifying as this had become, she had deemed it necessary. She was satisfied with not only the genuine performance of her obedient husband but by the honesty of the vendor, as the *gwenwyn* really did work quickly and had caused as promised the most overwhelming agony. She hid her blazing eyes in the soft folds of her husband's juddering clothing amid the rising clamour of drawn swords, the screaming of women and arrested staff. Men were shouting and yelling, and Morwena calmly ran through all the things which still needed doing in her mind as pandemonium began to break out all around her. As if from some innate knowledge, the raucous party in the town below even fell silent, which compelled these hundreds of aristocratic witnesses to do the same. The curious wind had died, and the only sound that could be heard now above the forlorn howling of a distant dog was the sobbing of Cartysman, who still gripped Bellnor's right hand and was weeping his passing. Morwena looked out finally from the folds of her husband's mantle, just as the king's tortured writhing and the drumming of his big feet on the table were abating. The poison she had so boldly administered had torn through his system like liquid fire and had ravaged him fatally and cruelly, causing a bone crunching rictus to arch his back like a bow. It relented now however, as his great spirit yielded finally to this deadly toxin and his defeated body relaxed to the tabletop.

Bellnor's head fell to one side and his pain filled eyes found Morwena's through the haze of his final moments of agony, and hers blazed back his longed-for death. Bellnor's final and desperate realisation in those very last, glimmering moments of pure torture, was that he had been betrayed

and murdered by his own family and at his baby granddaughter's spiritual foundation ceremony.

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Nine days only had passed when Cartysman acceded the throne of Breged to become King Cartysman ap Bellnor, but he did not officially inherit the 'ruling power' of the federation as he had thought. This bit of important legislation is being decided by the druidic council, and it is they who will draw up the list of challengers for the *rheolwr y grym*. None in Breged were at all surprised however when that suddenly unrestrained young monarch ignored the priesthood, took possession of the white rod of power and just assumed power regardless.

Feeling he had to make a bold gesture to secure his new kingship, Cartysman travelled north to Carfeta to discuss with General Cadallan their joint support for King Afyn of Coritana to the far south of Breged. He proposed that they should together thwart the bold and acquisitive Caswallawn in sending his troops of conquest north when no one would expect it. Cadallan agreed to this in principle, but being nobody's fool and knowing Caswallawn is fully committed on the south coast, he suspected Cartysman of duplicity and of making a grave error, transgressing against one of the powerful sons of Beli Mawr with whom Cadallan had made oaths of alliance in the last Roman war. Cadallan was a taciturn man of deep and complex strategy, and only his closest officers knew of his enduring hatred of Cartysman. Although he admired and respected many Brythonic monarchs, no king would ever rule Carfeta again, and that vacuous, self-promoting and deeply privileged young royal was everything Cadallan and all his people hated in 'royalty'. The celebrated general and *pendragon* of last year's Roman war had privately sworn that Cartysman would never hold the ruling power of Breged as Cadallan knew that young snake did not possess the strength, the statesmanship or the character required to wield it, and he never would. So, newly crowned King Cartysman of the Bregantau had left CaerLiwelyd with far less than he had appreciated at the time. As he and his Bregantan royal party had headed

down the great southern road on their return to DunRheadr, several very discreet individuals had set out behind them. Cadallan needed intelligence above all other things now, seeing a dark horizon in Breged's future.

Shortly thereafter, Pendragon Cadallan too packed for a journey south, but a much longer one and to another country.



Chapter Nine.

Twm the woodsman replaced the waisted and conical wicker eel trap, tucking it back under the undercut bank and tying it off on the peg. This was one of a dozen traps Twm had installed up and down this little river, but this last one sat in a big bend in this lively, burbling *nant* and which was not too far from his homestead. This pacey stream wound its way south through the heart of this forest, and its pretty banks were overgrown with *breci* bushes of a highly medicinal variety that the druid healers prized, and they were a precious avenue of extra income for this crofter. This valuable shrubbery of bride-wort or white meadowsweet as it was also known faced stiff competition from blackthorn, holly, and all manner of untamed undergrowth this time every year, as it had throughout this bountiful summer. Everything fought for survival in this forest, and every living plant in it competed for the light streaming through the leafy canopy above. These colourful wort bushes commanded a perfect location, as the light in this open riverside cleft was far improved from the forest's gloomy interior behind them. They were flanked by formations of tall and soldiery ranks of sun reaching nettles, and Twm had cut broad swaths of them down around each great bush. He did his best to help with his sickle throughout these weeks when he had the time, but the ferocious bankside growth around here was prodigious. All he managed to do each season was to trim back and reconfirm the avenues through and around these dense shrubs needed at harvest time, which was just around the corner. This sultry summer was maturing to a rude ripeness following a successful Beltain, and which blessing had caused an abundant crop growth throughout this land. Were it not for the impending calamity of the other Roman boot about to drop, most people's thoughts would now be turning to not only the great celebratory gathering of the ripe grain, but the swiftly following autumn and the day of the *Dark Lord* himself.

This lively, lily strewn brook was full of life, and its Gods' given bounty sustained and supplied this crofter's family with clean water, many fish, and a range of nourishing aquatic and bankside food. Tŵm knew every bend and snag of this river snaking through his forest and satisfied that this last trap had been well set, he raised himself from the grassy mud of its bank, brushing the debris from the knees of his woollen bracs. Picking his staff up from the ground, Tŵm stood up again with a groan, his other hand pressed to the familiar and persistent pain in his lower back. Wiping his hands on the rough wool of his mantle, Tŵm looked around for his dog.

"Come Marroc!" He called out, turning to head down this achingly familiar lane and toward the thatches of his croft. Tŵm stopped dead in his tracks, as his brave elkhound had not moved a muscle and had the strangest look on his long and shaggy face at that moment. Marroc's muscular body was quivering with a barely controlled emotion, and one which clearly hovered between excitement and fear. Facing the broad northern lane and away from their croft, Tŵm's dog was tilting his head from side-to-side, trying to identify some sound *he* could hear but which his master could not. The woodsman stood tall then and peered up this long, drover's lane himself, sweeping his gaze up the curving length of it. It vanished from sight, snaking into the trees of this dense forest, but Tŵm could see nothing unusual on or near that stretch of road. The long familiar spirit of this forest stirred then like smoke recoiling from an opened door, and a breeze ushered from this same northerly direction which was most uncommon. Marroc began to howl forlornly at that moment, his ruff standing up the whole length of his back like a long brush. His head was thrown back as he yowled and yammered in fearful excitement, dancing up and down on all four paws. Tŵm was deeply concerned at this mysterious behaviour in his normally courageous hound, but he was a doughty Brython himself by necessity and he stood his ground, lifting his chin and sniffing this curiously disturbed air that caressed his face now. Suddenly, birds began to appear from the north of all different species, and they were flitting like winged acrobats through the trees toward him now. Then, abruptly, there were thousands of them. They clamoured over his head now and filled the

air of this forest with their raucous alarm cries. All were fleeing south in some great consternation, and Tŵm stood rooted below this panicked mass of feathered arrows, gripping his staff tightly. Looking fearfully up this northern lane in astonishment as his dog went berserk beside him, Tŵm had never heard nor seen the like of it in all his long life. The deer came next, and dozens of these athletes of the animal world covered the ground swiftly toward him with huge, terrified bounds. They flashed past him without pause now, leaping the stream with ease and vanishing into the trees opposite, and the noise in this normally peaceful forest was suddenly deafening. Great lumbering elk kicked up clouds of dust ahead of the wolves and the foxes, all of which came tearing south ahead of a whole host of smaller, scurrying animals. Every living thing in this forest was heading south, southeast or southwest and all were running for their lives. Tŵm's nerve finally broke before this terrified onslaught, and he ran for home as if Arglwydd Lug Ddu himself had risen and was at his heels with a branding iron. He knew something terrible and something monstrous was approaching from the north, as did every creature in this forest, and they all fled from it now in abject terror. This middle-aged woodsman did the same, and with his dog tearing past him with his tail tucked right under him, they both ran for home as fast as their legs could carry them.

As Tŵm stumbled through the gate behind Marroc and into his enclosed croft, he was yelling like a raving lunatic and his dog was barking his head off, but all his family were already out of their thatches, no doubt alarmed at the great and unseen uproar in their forest. They all stood gaping now in superstitious terror to the north, as whatever cataclysmic force came their way it became clear that they would never flee whatever approached in time, as the very earth itself trembled now with its coming. The thundering avalanche of fleeing animals suddenly tailed off, and the ensuing silence in this forest was both eerie and profound, unnerving this family of superstitious werrin. Marroc was loyal and courageous though, and he stayed with his family, going berserk and running in circles around them with his fur standing up in terror and still barking fit to bust. Tŵm

and his family drew themselves sombrely into a line with him at the centre, and they held each other's hands tightly to face this doom together and as a family, come what may. The earth beneath their bare feet began to tremble, and the leaves on the trees around them rustled and shook at this unseen but terrifying arrival.

"Arglwydd Cornonnyn, Camulo Fawr and Beneficent Brigida, help us now in our hour of need!" Tŵm prayed the triad gruffly but loudly, and his two youngest alongside him began to wail in terror. He spoke gently to them then. "Now then Anwen bach and Arthwr *iawn*, no tears please.

Remember, we are Brythonau!" He reminded them evenly and in his beautifully lilted, musical accent. Young Arthwr bit his lip, but his younger sister cried on, and fat tears rolled down her chubby cheeks. Colossal, mounted men in armour appeared like Gods from between these trees suddenly, with thunderous steeds, shining mail, tall spears and long, glittering bronze shields, and there were hundreds of them. Tŵm almost sagged to his knees with relief, seeing the Lynx emblems on the pale green banners of these *Southern Brythonic* outriders, but his wife did exactly that, falling to her knees, still convinced that the world was coming to an end. The terrifying curse of Rome which every soul along this coast feared of late had not arrived on their doorstep, and they were not all doomed this day.

"Tad, look at them!" Dewi his eldest said with a rapturous voice, his young eyes as big as dinner plates as countless ranks of mounted warriors appeared all around his forest home, moving with a waving rhythm in their saddles. In this pendulous gait, these armoured leviathans threaded their equally huge and armoured mounts through the trees and the deadfall of this forest in Caint, and their enormous, iron shod shoes made the very earth itself tremble beneath their feet. Hundreds of chariots followed, and their rumbling, rattling transit was almost deafening. Armed and mounted soldiers stretched as far as the eye could see now to both east and west of them. Hundreds of big cavalry horses trotted by this enclosure, the riders looking magnificent in their shining mail, their Lynx

tabards and their steel helmets. Their long, flowing cloaks were mercifully Caswallawn's pale and royal green, and the children began to cheer. King Caswallawn it seems was heading south in arms, and Tŵm the crofter recalled the words of the ubiquitous prayer his taid had taught him as a boy, and he was compelled to recite it now to his relieved but awestruck family. With his eyes glittering, the head of this Prydeinig household adroitly captured a chicken as it rushed past in panic, and as Dewi helped his mam back to her feet, Tŵm's rich, musical voice carried out over the noise of this great movement of Brythonic troops.

"Arglwydd Cornonnyn, you are the man in the trees and the green man of the woods, he who brings life to the dawning spring each year. You are the deer in rut mighty horned one who ever roams the autumn woods, and you are the everlasting ruler of the animal kingdom. You are the hunter circling the oak great lord; he who wears the antlers of the wild stag. Yours is the lifeblood that spills upon the ground each season and we worship you Arglwydd Cornonnyn!" He spoke these ancient words, and his eyes filled with the tears of his lifelong devotion. Drawing his dagger smoothly and with one swift stroke, he cut the head off the flapping chicken in his left fist and held it up for all to see. "God of the green, Lord of the forest, we offer you our humble sacrifice and beg for your blessing. We beg too for your protection of our noble King Caswallawn and these his valiant warriors in their forthcoming struggle for survival against the foreign tyrant Caesar!" He prayed loudly, and his strong and proud, lilting baritone drifted across this dusty enclosure and on through the ranks of trees and oncoming soldiers, and as the flapping bird squirted its lifeblood to the dust and its own severed head at Tŵm's feet, his children became still and quiet. A spectacularly armoured and superbly mounted officer among a group of fabulously attired riders passing had broken from his men to approach the low northern wall of this enclosure. Tŵm held his breath from a sudden doubt and a rush of visceral fear as this glimmering noble rode alongside his enclosure wall, his beautiful horse's head hanging over it and inspecting his herb garden briefly, but this smiling

noble doffed his gold trimmed helmet to Tŵm, and he bowed his head to him in thanks for the prayer and the honest sacrifice before he continued and trotted on, back to his huge and grisly lords on their massive war horses. As Tŵm breathed out and his shoulders sagged, that awesome individual trotted off through these trees to re-join his men, and Tŵm was stunned by the realisation of just who that was, and his knees felt weak from the knowledge. The boys looked at their tad with both surprise and pride at the oath and at the spontaneous sacrifice, the gravity of that fleeting moment lost on them perhaps. Their eyes glittered with a shared emotion however and at the recognition from that amazing person whomever he was, and perhaps the unspoken promise of a roast chicken dinner. This was an event that would go down in Prydein's long history as well as this family's, that much was clear to all but the youngest. This proud Prydeinig family bore excited witness to their king, his lords, champions, and all his warriors' great passing to war through their forest. This simple but honourable werrin family of southern crofters stood for a long time entranced before the women broke first as their work is never done, but Tŵm and his boys stood there pointing to this House and the other as all the various colours and cygils of Lloegr passed them by in full parade honour and armoured spectacle. This seemingly endless passage of horse, chariot and warrior eventually thinned, but the rear guard stopped nearby for the night, and Tŵm's normally peaceful and silent forest came alive with dozens of campfires. Groups of Brythonic fighters had settled all around his croft, and their fires twinkled in the darkness between the tall surrounding trunks, their noise keeping his children animated late into the evening. Bereft of wild animals, their forest had a completely different atmosphere this night and as Tŵm the woodsman and his immediate family settled down to sleep in their round, central thatch. The hearth was set for the night, the door was barred and the young ones were under fur together. The boys were in their stacked beds against the far wall, and Tŵm lay on his comfortable, heather stuffed pallet under thick bear fur, snoring gently. Marroc was stretched out at his

back and his wife was curled up in his crook, as all Brythons slept and so did Tŵm, his dreams filled with dazzling, armoured warriors.

This forest seemed to whisper to itself for hours after this momentous event, but, following three haunting but effective owl hoots from somewhere in the dark, it became as silent as the grave.

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As Caesar pushed his forces west through the softly rolling hills and abandoned farmlands of Kantion, it was only when they emerged from the trees each time that they saw the destruction ahead of them, realising they had been anticipated once more.

A watery, misty dawn had just broken, and Caesar knew that they were under constant observation already this morning. The Prittans could be seen flitting about these dew laden trees or standing huddled in small groups on hazy hill tops, always keeping their distance. If he sent cavalry after them he knew they would just melt away, and his frustrations were mounting. He had swung below the Prittan's fortress of *KarrKant* which had been the scene of his betrayal, his about face, so much violence and so much loss last year as he did not want to set eyes upon it. West of that circumvented stronghold and more than twenty miles from his beachhead, he and his legions climbed a stepped incline and onto a broad expanse of down which was painted purple from the heather growing across it. Pleasing Caesar immensely being his favourite colour, he called a halt at its margin. Sweeping his gaze across this great tinted moorland stretching to the west ahead of them, it seemed empty. This highly coloured moor was interspersed with incongruous looking stands of vividly green trees which seemed lost in their leafy isolation amid this featureless violet ocean. The fringes of this down were hemmed in by the ubiquitous evergreen forests of Prittan, and so, sending the Gallic cavalry ahead as a vanguard, Caesar ordered his men to march across the vivid heather of this broad purple heath before them.

A coastline was constantly to their right as they marched across this springy and rose hued growth, which was more than ankle deep and deceptive. This mature heather underfoot caused many to stumble on its hidden roots, but they ploughed on across it regardless, passing several dense stands of alder and beech, birch and hazel, willow and ash. Occasionally, the right flank would get a glimpse of blue where the land dipped and a great river came into view, confirming both their location and direction. As they neared the dense, western treeline ahead of them, smoke from some small and unseen village could be seen rising from somewhere behind those reaching and conical pine trees, and Caesar guessed that there was a main route nearby. It probably lay behind this woodland ahead of them, and it may take them all the way to the estuary of the Tamesa and to one Lud's Dun. Crunching, clanking and the stamping of thousands of feet made a terrific din as the legions tailed the cavalry ever west, but the infantry was cursing this heather they trampled over regardless of its bouquet and its vibrant beauty as it was making them sweat. Two hundred yards from the starkly contrasting green fringe ahead of them, the Prittans made their presence known and by appearing in many hundreds. More Prittanic warriors appeared among the undergrowth barriers between the old pines to both their flanks, and in a heartbeat they were besieged.

The chariots came first, and there were many hundreds of these Trojan-like and fabulously decorated vehicles in these two closing formations. The paired horses pulling them had their teeth bared as they were at the full gallop already as they cleared the trees to both sides, and their garrulous occupants were screaming their indecipherable war cries and brandishing their spears as they came barrelling at both flanks at once. They were closing fast in two huge clouds of dust and a cacophony of banging and rattling from the trees, and the ground began to tremble at their clattering approach over this purple heather. As Caesar's centurions screamed for the men to reform and to stand to as the cavalry charged out to meet these fast-closing enemy vehicles, the dust clouds became enormous as they clashed in whirling maelstroms around each other.

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It was a bright, blustery morning in Albion and still well short of midday as Cadwy thundered around this dusty practice ground of his father's triple-hilled fortress of DunEil. He was riding his keenly missed and beloved *carbad* for the first time in many months, and he held the reins easily in his left hand again despite the hiatus, standing with his legs apart and with his long hair flying wildly behind him. This stunning two-wheeled chariot he now rode with flair and a deep, thrilling sense of excitement had been beautifully made for him with a blend of old tradition and the new, and he had been itching to have it reassembled. His emotional stresses had tested him recently, and as Eirwen was now only days from giving birth he needed distraction this morning more than anything, and he revelled in the bone-jarring sense of freedom this amazing chariot gave him.

He had slept well for a change and felt as fit as a hunting dog this morning, relishing the cold wind in his face and tearing at his hair as he charged around the circular pathway to his father's parade ground. Cadwy almost whooped with joy as he led a voluminous cloud of gritty dust around this arena, and which was whipped aside behind him by the sheering wind sweeping over the palisades to scour this high hillfort as it always did, even this soon after a pale and featureless dawn had broken. This magnificent war chariot, thrumming violently and loudly under his dancing feet now had been lovingly made for him by the specialist military carters and wheelwrights of Albion. These experienced engineers were endowed with generations of skill and knowledge, handed down to them from their glorious Trojan ancestors, and these highly skilled men and women were perhaps the finest vehicle makers in all Prydein. These master craftsmen and women had built the framework and the spars of Cadwy's war chariot from ash, which is both strong and light. Rawhide was used for lashing the joinery, and a lattice weave of this tough and durable hide made up the flexible standing platform on which Cadwy now stood, with a superb natural balance and with an ease born of many

hours' practice. Uniquely to Troy and to Prydein these chariots are two-man and two-horse in use, having a seat at the front for a driver and Cadwy's was no exception in this regard, with a wide seat installed behind the shield guard for his driver to use in combat. Even these horses were descendants of the pale thoroughbreds of Hector's breeding which Brutus had brought to this country, and Miseus his armourer had been instrumental in the design of these chariots of flamboyant and speedy warfare. Although the wheels had evolved a great deal in the interceding generations from the necessity of a much-changed terrain, almost half a millennia later the basic Trojan design and form to the car remained. The driver of these modern-day equivalents allowed the noble warrior on the rear platform to concentrate on the fighting just as Miseus intended those generations ago. The aristocrats in the car would hurl their *saffwy* at the enemy or fire their slingshot or their arrows at them as they charged past, parallel to the enemy front ranks. When the ammunition was used up, their drivers would slew sharply to a halt so that their noble leader could demount and take the battle to their enemy on foot with sword and shield if he or she so wished, and Cadwy had practised these transitional manoeuvres hundreds of times. Each side of this magnificent carbad had a slot in the framework to accept a round shield, and a long, conical boot of thick leather was mounted behind each one, making a useful pair of holsters for extra spears or arrows. Once the noble warrior had delivered his weaponry in battle from his vehicle, his driver would then circle around as his *gŵyr* or *gawres* fought on foot with sword and shield, before picking him or her up again at a signal, and they would both then speed back to the ranks to rearm with more javelins and more arrows. Then the pair would charge back into the fray and do it all over again as was the custom of the Trojans of old, and that too remains unchanged among the equally fearless Prydeinig aristocracy. It is the enduring custom of the elite Brythonic warriors of this modern world to war in vehicles when the circumstances allow, and Selgofa in Albion was no different.

Cadwy flicked the long, polished reins across the broad backs of these magnificently paired horses, whose coats shone a deep and glowing chestnut in this morning sunlight. It made him smile with an intense pleasure as he had prepared them both himself. Putting his booted foot on the back of the driver's seat, he gently tugged the outer of the two left-hand reins which were threaded forward to each horse through a system of beautifully crafted *terrets* or metal eyes, all affixed to the top of the pole reaching out between these two superb horses. This system controlled the angle at which the reins tugged on the horse bits in manual instruction, and the system was as ancient as it was effective. Duron the left horse obeyed instantly, and leading his sister Doran into the turn, they made a fine curve in the dust as they swung back around toward the gatehouse in a graceful arc. These shining terrets mounted to Cadwy's pole had been fashioned from silvered iron in the shape of the Albion Boar, each animal facing forwards and standing on a hollow log. A fine, bronze collar had been fitted to the inside of each hollow log forming a tube, and all gleamed now from the constant polishing by the leather reins which passed through them. All the shining metalwork on these horses' straps and their saddlery had been manufactured with a consummate skill and artistry, giving some clue as to the status of the owner, as the amount of gold they must have cost to produce would have challenged all but a privileged few. All the buckles, horse bits and the single jointed snaffles were all matching in silvered iron and design, and even the outside ring of each horse bit had been lovingly decorated and embellished. The metal jointing finials of this chariot's stunning bodywork all gleamed with the same Trojan inspired artistry, and even the J-shaped lynchpins at the hubs; those vital clasps which kept the wheels on the axles had both been decorated and silvered where they could be seen. A broad and wonderfully carved dorsal yoke of ash was secured to this terreted pole by the famous *Gordian Knot*; the fabled knot which had fixed the yokes to the poles of the mythical kings of Phrygia, Greece and of course to Troy's speedy chariots. The *Gordian* knot which fastened Cadwy's yoke to this pole was identical in operation but quite different in

design. It had been developed by the rope masters of Prydein into a series of links and knots that mirrored the much loved, flowing, intertwined, and knotted designs painted around the sweeping front panel of this carbad. The unfixed and suspended rear tray of this chariot which vibrated wildly under his boots was hung from a stout oak 'Y' post at each corner and by four thick and plaited ropes of rawhide, giving it an excellent measure of suspension. These twisted rawhide straps at each corner enabled the seated driver to operate over rough ground without his passenger being constantly catapulted from a *fixed* rear fighting platform at every rock and bump. The driver's bench seat was mounted with two coils of wrought strap iron, giving it too some added flexibility and comfort whilst also softening the ride. The wheel span of a little over four and a half feet made this carbad stable even in the tightest of turns, and Cadwy's military chariot was expertly made from long invention, and it was frighteningly fast and extremely light. It kicked up clouds of sandy dust as he charged across his father's dusty quadrangle now, creaking, banging, and rattling as if it were a living thing beneath his dancing feet. The thick and twisted, rawhide plaits supporting the rear platform creaked loudly from each corner as he took a bend, and the rear bed of this chariot would swing outwards with each turn. With practice this became a boon and made balancing much easier, as this juddering platform under him tilted when cornering. These creaking, flat straps of hide underfoot and which criss-crossed this standing platform also took a huge amount of the jostling out of the ride, greatly improving the aim of the standing warrior, and Cadwy had learned to 'ride the hide' as if it was second nature. As was common on these mornings of both training and pure elation he was both warrior and driver, and Cadwy pulled back a little on all the reins as he had spotted his *cyfail*; the surviving cabal of his closest friends emerging onto the practice ground of this enormous dun and from behind the huge smelt and forge building. Duron and Doran responded to his insistent tugging and began to slow, and Cadwy steered them toward this group of young nobles and Albion's great war smithy, slewing sharply to his left at the last moment. The chariot skidded to a halt in front of his

friends in an ostentatious display of his skill, and it covered them in a fine cloud of dust. Stepping up onto the back of the driver's seat from the fighting platform and looping the reins over the pole, Cadwy dropped to the ground with a broad smile on his face. His friends coughed and spluttered, making him laugh as he stroked Duron's quivering flanks, but they gathered nonetheless as Cadwy's wonderful carbad was a thing of great beauty. It was of compulsive interest to them all, and they had helped him reassemble the vehicle and prepare it for today's practice once all the parts had been rescued from storage. They had readily assisted him with cleaning the painted surfaces, polishing the leather work and with the threading of the lengths of glossy leather straps through the rows of terrets. Although they each had many servants and slaves to call upon, they had all got their hands dirty greasing the great hubs and the inside of the naves with the greatest of pleasure, before his cyfail had then lifted the carbad easily so that he and Hefin could mount the beautiful, matched pair of very modern wheels. Hefin was his battle driver and had served in that honoured position in the war against Rome last year when they had both been somewhat naive and less encumbered young men. He was the first to caress one of these stunning wheels, smiling at the precious memories they shared, and with a finger, Hefin traced the swirling designs along its iron bound, circular ash rim with a far-off look in his eyes.

"One piece!" Hefin said in wonder for the umpteenth time, amazed by this new method of manufacture which had flourished in recent years. These stunning, twelve spoked wheels danced, and these lightweight, masterful creations had replaced the bulkier six-piece rims which had been in use for centuries in Prydein. Those more robust six spoke rims had themselves replaced the first and considerably heavier, four spoke wheels on the Trojan chariots which had first graced these shores and which had struggled in these sylvan territories. It took a great deal of forward planning to create these new and stronger rims, as ash saplings had to be bent, staked and clamped around a number of wheel-like formers as they

grew to achieve the requisite size and curve. It took great skill and judgement to produce two perfectly matching circles of living ash from the constantly replaced and larger formers, and equal skilful endeavour to then pare back the wood to form the pre-dried shape of a perfect pair of rims, correctly and at the correct time, allowing for the inevitable shrinkage. These seasoned hoops of ash would then be joined weeks later by these master wheelwrights with well-formed scarf joints and then sealed with strong glue and a peg. Luckily, the technique had been perfected of late, and Cadwy's unique carbad was among the first to benefit from this new development along a few others he had added himself, such as the shield slots to either side and the pairs of extra holsters. Cadwy and Hefin had both witnessed the vital process of fitting the iron *tyers* to these wheels, and each had been sacred moments of great druid-led theatre. The ceremony had taken place on the third, sacred and southernmost of these triple hills of DunEil, obviously, and it had been a night they would both always remember. A roaring fire had been built around these iron hoops to much ceremony, and a litany of ancient prayers and dedications were offered to the Gods by the burly smiths throughout, overseen and supported by the tonsured druid priests, as they were ever the directors of all ceremony. The smith had his own incantations and prayers to Gofannon which he had muttered darkly as he lit the fires that night; 'Summer to winter, sunrise to sunset, birth to death, breath to fire, fire to wood, wood to stone, stone to iron and I close the sacred circle in the name of Arglwydd Gofannon Mawr.' The smith sent this truly ancient prayer to his own God and just as he was deciding if the 'tyer' was red hot and glowing enough. Each great shimmering circle of red steel was then lifted from the flames with long iron tongs by the Selgofan smiths and prised with equally long levers onto these one-piece rims, the assistants nudging and knocking these circles of glowing, sparking steel evenly onto the awaiting wooden wheels. The heavy hammers of the smiths were used then to tap both iron rings firmly and accurately down into place amid scorching wood and clouds of smoke before they were quenched then with cold water. This had been mixed

with a splash of some unspeakable liquid from a druid's vial, and then each *tyer* shrank amidst copious chanting, hissing and voluminous clouds of odious steam, to compress, lock together and to *tie* all the various components of each wheel fast around the *nave*; a vital and much evolved part of the puzzle. The nave is the hollow tube of wood which forms the core of the wheel hub and which fits over the stub of the axle, and into which the inner ends of the twelve spokes were fitted. The nave was a crucial piece of the wheelwright's riddle and was invariably turned from seasoned elm, discouraged from splitting in use by being secured with a forged iron nave-band, *sweated on* close around each open end. These naves needed to be exceptionally durable and so were constructed with an iron core, and then each had been expertly lined with a specially formulated copper alloy bearing to keep them spinning freely. Cadwy recalled that memorable night when these fabulous wheels had been *tied*, with Hefin at his side and the multitude of midnight stars above them in shared witness. As if it had happened yesterday, Cadwy could see clearly in his mind the leaping, crackling flames rising amid the chanted prayers of the druids and the burly smiths, the hissing of the stinking steam bellowing, and the urgent tapping of the hammers. All of which combined to create a sacred and highly charged atmosphere of creation, out of which fiery crucible were born a beautiful pair of iron-shod wheels of almost perfect balance and breathtaking symmetry.

The one-piece rims on this magnificent vehicle along with the pair of impressive hubs they were mounted to were beautifully decorated now along with all twelve oak spokes. These beautifully turned and graceful spokes had been meticulously shaved and dished on the outer edges to reduce wobbling, also to compensate for their expansion in extended use. All had been ornamented and painted in the swirling, interlinked designs so loved by the Brythons, and almost every piece of visible wood on this chariot had been similarly carved, painted, and adorned with silver and gold foil. It was the most up-to-date, stunning, and expensive war chariot in the whole kingdom, and Cadwy was immensely proud of it. He never

tired of explaining the design, the engineering, and the state-of-the-art methods of manufacture to any and to all who would listen. His friends were all inspecting the chariot now, pointing out each marvel and feature with great enthusiasm. Cadwy smiled at Hefin, Bleddyn and the now greying Gŵyr Brast ap Bwlch as all had a keen interest in any vehicle, and they poured over the machine now, knowing how much incredible work and artistry had gone into its construction.

“Hefin! Give Bleddyn a charge around the square first, or we won’t have a moment’s peace from him!” Cadwy offered with a wink, and Hefin nodded back with a knowing smile of his own, jumping onto the driving seat and grabbing the reins. His smile was dwarfed by the one from their big comrade, and without pause Bleddyn climbed aboard the fighting platform.

“Let’s go Hefin, you podgy-arsed farmer’s boy!” Pencampwr Bleddyn yelled at his Albion peer with a ribald excitement, and he drew his immaculate sword *Caled-taro*, whooping in delight and locking his knees against the frame in the proper way. With a wry grin from his sprung seat, Hefin flicked the long whip over the horse’s heads and Duron and Doran started, yanking the carbad forward, and Bleddyn had to hold on for dear life as it took off like a scalded cat. Over the thunder of hooves and the roaring of Bleddyn, ‘Hard-killer’ cleaved the air above the chariot with a gleaming deadliness, and the parade ground of DunEil was filled with sandy dust once more.

“All we need now Cadwy, is tunic-lifting Romans!” Bleddyn yelled back at him, having completely recovered from the terrible wound he had suffered in that war. His bearded face was florid with bloodlust as he almost vanished in his own cloud of dust, and Cadwy’s eyes narrowed as he watched his big combrogi yelling his head off. He smiled, appreciating the man’s unique qualities and his character even more now his cyfail were so reduced. Only he could subdue Bleddyn in a training fight and that only through his guile and superior techniques, but when Bleddyn was really aroused he would swell up with rage, and all but the insane would back

away in alarm. Cadwy loved him, as there was no guile in the man apart from that learned for fighting, but in his character he was an open door. There was no mistaking Bleddyn's smouldering anger either, as his face would flush and swell dangerously, his chest too, and his lantern, deeply bearded jaw would protrude in ominous challenge. Bleddyn had never looked for trouble when they had been 'out on the tref' as younger, less burdened men, but his size had seemed to draw trouble as most of Prydein's young men see challenge everywhere. These troublemakers were almost without exception outside of the warrior class, and they sought only ale and brutal distraction, often in the disgusting dog and cock pits which abound in northern Prydein. The warrior sought only *bri*, and gold of-course, but mostly *bri*, which was irretrievably chained with forged iron links to their honour, their honesty and their oath-sworn loyalty, and also to a humility born from the clear understanding of their higher calling. This philosophical teaching installed in all Brythonic martial students from the earliest age spoke of this higher calling, in that their lifelong careers would be spent in the service of those who could *not* fight, those they were sworn to protect and with their lives if necessary. They were sworn to this, even if those same people did not understand their motives, as it was commonly the very mead addled or foolish youth of the werrin they were sworn to protect who usually challenged them, but these misguided young men were *their* werrin too. All the warrior class with very few exceptions would rather walk away than brawl in the street with a civilian, but there was a line. By the very nature of their existence, there is always a line with a professional fighter and one which is crossed at much risk. Any of these young Albion men of the tref's alehouses that were drunk enough or foolish enough to push Bleddyn further were given ample enough warning to move away, as his emotions were always writ large upon his broad and hairy face. All this unexpressed anger presaged the most dangerous moment in Cadwy's experience, as that gentle and boisterous giant had an anger slow to burn like oily wood, but once his fire was blazing it was incredibly difficult to snuff out. On the rare occasion Bleddyn was pushed beyond his high tolerance limit, he could go wild with

the madness of battle and would lay waste to everyone and everything around him. Utterly lost to any voice of reason or authority, it would take six men or more to contain the *berserk* Bleddyn before all around was destroyed, and the next morning's queue to see the Meddyg would reach right around his enclosure. It was when the big man became suddenly still, and it was when some of the colour left his broad face that signalled the point before the dam actually burst, and Cadwy had come to recognise it, as it had served them all well in last year's war against the Romans. Cadwy spat to the parade ground then, as his anger at the infamous northern exclusion still burned him as it did all his people. They could all be down south now in this chariot and many hundreds of others like it, attacking the invading dog of Rome in Caint again, and this time destroying the arrogant rogue, not enjoying a privileged pastime hundreds of miles away. His thoughts flew to the familiar but far distant south coast, as it often did lately. As Hefin brought the chariot back around with its garrulous, sword swinging occupant clinging to the rear, Cadwy wondered how his acquaintance King Caswallawn was faring against the Roman dog this day, as all reports agreed that he was hard pressed and had suffered greatly at the hands of that foreign *gwain* since the landing.

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To the rising sound of bronze war horns hidden deep in these trees, three hundred of the Southern Brythons' fabulous chariots surged forward from the fringe and from where they had been held in reserve, catching a lone detachment of the hated Gallic cavalry out in the open and too far from their host. These deeply reviled enemy horsemen were soon surrounded by this circle of rattling and banging vehicles, all towed at a furious pace behind their galloping horses. Encircled, and with the warriors on the rear platforms screaming abuse at these cornered enemy riders and launching their spears at them with uncanny accuracy as they shot past in dizzying circles, the fate of this cavalry detachment was sealed.

As Caswallawn looked on at this first onslaught of his hugely expensive war vehicles, his eyes were unfocused and distant, the mental bone board of his current life dominating his thoughts and his vision. He was thinking of his glorious and much missed father, as it was the late Beli Mawr's often victorious gambit of *rhannwr yr ewyll* at the game of bones which was now in play. It had been the high king's infamous 'divider of will' ploy which had undone Gŵyr Fychan Fawr those years ago. It was when that monstrously muscled but diminutive lord had become torn by indecision and from Beli Mawr's surprising gambit, and the little big man's vacillation that day had cost him the game and his prize stallion.

Caswallawn saw the furious assault of his elite charioteers, and he was pleased in the way in which they had successfully separated a large detachment of the hated Gallic cavalry so that they could be destroyed by them in a fatal demonstration and a dire warning to their turncoat Galliad combrogi. He remained detached as those garish Celtic auxiliaries were slaughtered and their horses ridden off to much cheering from his Brythonic ranks, and this Casufel monarch gave a thoughtful nod to an awaiting cornwr, who then swiftly blew the recall loudly, clearly and repeatedly as instructed. Caswallawn's gŵyrd's vengeance against the Gallic cavalry had been hotly lobbied and argued for and so he had agreed to this planned demonstration, but now his incensed charioteers were shaping up to attempt a repeat performance but against the main enemy force, and they had to be stopped. This *part sarhaed* had to be ended now before his lords and ladies made a grave error in the heat of their vengeance as the Romans were anything but stupid. Caswallawn was satisfied at least, when at the call of the horn they wheeled away from the reformed and expectant Romans, causing huge swirling vortices of white dust around them from the chalky ground. Just out of javelin range, his noble charioteers then drove past their enemy in their circular and interlinking patterns in an ostentatious display and which always looked so fraught with danger. At the point of imminent head-on collision, they would flash past each other without touching but with broad grins on their faces. Some would even 'ride the pole' and lean out to slap each other's

hands as they thundered past each other, their wheels almost grazing in passing, and it was deeply impressive horsemanship, earning more raucous cheering from the men and women around him at these fringes. His carbads withdrew from that vast, swirling cloud they had created before the enemy ranks and clattered back into these trees, flashing past to either side of Caswallawn and his stoic gŵyrd, many of these audacious drivers still flamboyantly riding their poles and cheering loudly as they crashed back into this forest, making the king smile and shake his head at their recklessness. Then the Romans made the mistake Caswallawn and all his Khumric archers had waited patiently for, and his smile turned to an avaricious smirk, one which matched the grimacing lynx on his breastplate briefly. Caesar's Gallic cavalry whose reciprocated hatred of Caswallawn's Brythons became entrenched by the treatment they and their comrades had received at their merciless hands, and their need for vengeance became utterly overwhelming in a hot Celtic heartbeat. This typically fiery and commonly uncontrollable Gallic outrage clouded their judgement, and they charged mindlessly after these swiftly vanishing Brythonic carbads and their taunting occupants. A large detachment of these mounted Roman auxiliaries plunged carelessly into these trees in pursuit of Caswallawn's men and women, and none who entered emerged alive again. They were either swept from their saddles by ropes and fell upon in a welter of honed, blue Brythonic steel, or they were swatted off their horses by a volley of Khumric arrows to the chest. Not one riderless mount escaped this forest or the grasping fingers of Caswallawn's soldiers either, as horses were as vital as food at this stage of the game in hand. In minutes and despite this error, Caesar had marshalled his cavalry and was once again able to advance against him, but Caswallawn's mind drifted back to the game board as he watched the Roman general and his attendant group of officers gather for a hurriedly assembled, *mounted* council. As Caswallawn's forces withdrew into the forest behind him, he grinned savagely again from the undergrowth, knowing that he had given Caesar a good stiff punch in the mouth. He fully expected the all-out response of the enraged Roman general now and the hot pursuit to where

his ambush was being set, but Caswallawn's eyes hardened as he saw his enemy break up into different and unexpected shapes. It fascinated him, and he frowned, surprised at what was happening on the rosy hued moorland before him. Strangely, a large number of those soldiers had started setting up camp right there in front of him. Caesar obviously thought Caswallawn had completely fled the field as usual following his attack on the cavalry, and his soldiers were now digging a huge, circular trench in that springy heather whilst others were felling trees from around their chosen location. Caswallawn frowned at this unexpected development. 'You don't stop now and on that particular square to build a caer!' He thought with a raised eyebrow, his mind still focused on the bone game in hand. The other dark eyebrow arched to join its sibling above the king's widening eyes, as Caswallawn now saw that Caesar had formed a large foraging or reconnaissance force outside that slowly forming, distant and brown circle in the purple heather. That enemy general was dividing his troops, and it was like a clarion call to Caswallawn. There were many hours left in this day and yet it seems that Roman general refused to squander even one of them, planning to leave an undefended and work distracted garrison behind on *Rhôs yr Rhôslyn* as he went exploring. His men were furiously preparing the ground for a temporary fort, and it was surprising behaviour. This changed the game in play dramatically, requiring a swift and punishing move to correct the mysterious behaviour of an unpredictable opponent, and once again Caswallawn looked to the example of his late father. Calling for his senior gŵyrd, he quickly made his orders clear, raising several murderous smiles on their grisly faces. This was clearly infectious among the most senior of his *lynx* officers around him, and their king's galvanising orders were passed excitedly onto their captains along with their own instructions, and several green clad messenger knights were called over. These venerated and utterly independent, indentured messengers with their hurriedly sealed royal warrants would play a vital part in this swiftly evolving bone game in hand. Three, silver dipped knuckle bones shuffled forward on the

bone board of Caswallawn's mind as these *cennadwr marchog* leapt astride their fabulous horses.

A trio of the fastest and most coveted steeds in the land along with their amazingly resolute riders were dispatched in all haste to recall the brigades of chariots for their king's ad-hoc shift in strategy. These valiant *cennadwr marchog* with their flashing gold brooches took direct but different routes, breaking the treeline and tearing across this ruddy moor from the same point in this forest and at their usual blistering pace, raising three livid and chalky white lines of dust behind them. A watching druid saw the three diverging trails of these swiftly vanishing messengers as a holy sign, reminiscent of his own sacred symbol of the three lanes to Awen, and so he began to sing. Despite this sudden and joyous outpouring of choral prayer from the priests around them, the thousands of other eyes staring at those three departing equine comets were full of envy.



Chapter Ten.

Caesar spat his frustration to this purple heather, his ire at the disobedience of his Gallic auxiliaries flushing his neck dangerously, as they had gone against his personal standing orders by pursuing those Prittans into the trees and to their certain deaths. Almost two hundred naked, headless and mutilated bodies had been cast from the treeline of that forest and into the open, making a horrific, blood-smeared barrier of torn and pink Roman flesh on the purple heather, and it had incensed him and all his men. All those horses had vanished without trace, commandeered by the Prittans to be no doubt used against him in the future, and he was livid. Verus Lollius, the centurion in charge of those cavalrymen was to be demoted and flogged for his insubordination and the rash flouting of his orders, but his head was currently being brandished atop a tall spear by one of those filthy barbarians at the treeline, so the reckless Lollius had escaped his judgement. True to form however and following the drubbings he had already handed out to these Prittans they had become timid, refusing to confront his ranks in any further direct confrontation and were content with remaining on the fringes to his mounting frustration. They only attacked now with their chariots in sudden and blazing assaults before melting away once more, just as they had done today. His men had ridden out and had struggled to engage them, getting picked off continually, but the Prittans had vanished again before he could bring his ranks to the battle, and it was maddening, going against all the known precepts and principles of war. Recently, these Prittans would break off an attack without warning and leave the area of attack completely, to then reassemble in some predetermined location nearby where they would lay another ambush, and he was impressed by their martial improvements as it seems however primitive these barbarians were, they certainly learned quickly. Following this latest

wild and uncoordinated attack, he knew that those hundreds of chariots and their flamboyant occupants will no doubt be awaiting him in further ambush somewhere on his route tomorrow, even as it was unknown to them. This alone spoke volumes to Caesar as to their advanced levels of organisation and communication, and as beleaguered as he was, this King *Cassivellaunus* was not one to be underestimated.

The Prittans' abrupt and strange singing drew his attention to some distant trails of dust blazing across the eastern sector of this purple heather, and Caesar was amazed to see three horses galloping faster than he thought possible. They streaked across the vivid undergrowth of these chalky downs and in diverging directions from a point in that distant treeline, and the gazes of all around him were drawn to their fantastic flight. Those riders' voluminous green capes flew wildly behind them as they tore away into dwindling and distant figures, and Caesar came to realise the source of the Prittan's astonishing communication capabilities. Tearing from one treeline to another in a blur, those three scouts and others like them had steeds that clearly outpaced any of his own. Unbelievably, they outperformed any horses he had ever seen, and he was determined to capture one or more of them and their flamboyant riders.

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Their equipment and their message panniers were custom designed as snag-free and securely fastened satchels which hugged the contours of their horses' rumps. These men were mounted with small and light saddles for the utmost speed, and all these gallant, trusted messengers were trained in working out the fastest route to their target and then getting there with their dispatches intact, in the fastest time possible. To this end, they had been issued with the fastest and most expensive horses that money could buy, anywhere. These fine-featured thoroughbreds which catapulted their riders across open countryside at hair raising speeds had their nostrils cut when very young by their Epidian masters, allowing them to breathe deeper at the gallop when fully grown.

This unique Trojan bloodline had come with Brutus half a millennia ago, and the breed had been fastidiously protected by those horse masters of old, and their progeny were now considered virtually priceless. The pale grey forerunners of these muscular horses had been bred for their strength, their courage and an unmatched endurance by Prince Hector himself, but above all for their speed. This meticulous selection process had endured throughout Brutus and his Trojans' wanderings for another five hundred years here in Prydein, and these thundering equestrian comets were now bred exclusively in Epidia, the very finest lords and ladies of this incomparable breed being born on holy Ynys Epona in DunAdda alone. These invaluable chargers from the isle of Epona were reserved for Prydein's aristocracy, Epidia's own, highly lucrative middle eastern exports, and but one other *domestic* customer; the independent and mounted messengers of this nation of kings known as the honourable *cennadwr marchog*. The unforgettable moment when these messenger knights were introduced to their partners and comrades in battle; their highly-strung but wonderful horses was a rare and special moment, treasured by all these men. The ongoing relationships they would have with these unique and irreplaceable animals would bind man and horse together, to the death more often than not. The distinctive and exclusive sprinters these men clung to in the prosecution of their duties were now Epidia's and Prydein's finest and rarest breed, being the envy of every person who beheld them, and each was worth a king's ransom along with the lives of their riders. The sacred, emotionally charged night of their induction was full of ancient ceremony and rite, and which culminated in the men lining up to receive a bold tattoo on the backs of their right hands and of the same galloping cygil of their order. This was a fully armed and mounted, roaring and sword wielding image of a mounted King Locrinus, Brutus' son and heir and the Trojan monarch who had founded their national institution more than four hundred years previously. These intricate tattoos were necessarily done so that no imposter could waylay and replace these unique individuals. No one could steal their clothes and the gold brooch from their dead bodies in the vain hope of impersonation,

as without this corresponding, impressive and highly detailed tattoo on their right hand in support, it would be impossible. The punishment for any unlawful mistreatment or the tampering of any valid message of battle was the unflinching extermination of the messenger, his beloved horse and his entire family line. It was a ferocious burden of responsibility, shied from by many applicants when push came to shove, especially when they tried out their tiny and brutally uncomfortable sprinting saddles. Trainees soon realised that any extended time in these thin, stiff and unyielding leather seats would lead to untold agonies and quite possibly the inability to ever sire children thereafter. Their service however was often pivotal in times of war, as no bird message alone, however compelling could be obeyed when it came to the commitment of troops to the fray and risking the lives of people, unless it was branded with a king's own cygil. Even then, a prudent general would hesitate as the brand could be false, knowing that all things were possible in war. A general would be regarded infinitely more culpable if he responded to a royally branded bird message without human confirmation from a green swathed messenger, and then lost his men in the attack due to forged orders, than he would ever be if he withheld those same forces, and an equal number of men from his army were lost elsewhere as a cost of his *inaction*. Such were the demands on senior staff officers, and it had always been thus, as the more the *bri* the bigger the personal risk. These bird borne and crucial military imperatives which ordered the commitment of troops to combat would be used largely to plan and to adjust for the proposed plan of action. They would not be acted upon until supported and sanctioned by a dashing *cennadwr marchog* in his flying green cloak and floppy hat, and with a proper sealed skin of branded and matching orders. Each of these mounted knights would proudly display his tattooed right hand on delivery and exhibit the golden brooch warrant of his authority, both in proud support of the unbroken seal on that document he had brought with him at such reckless abandon. These brilliantly polished, solid gold badges were smugly worn for all to see, and these proud men always walked with

an unmatched air of élan and unhurried elegance everywhere they went, even as they broke every speed record in the land at their work.

Caswallawn's latest intelligences arrived at an unnerving speed, coming to a dramatic, skidding halt at this forest's edge and in full sight of the enemy. In a flurry of green cape and floppy hat, this rider vaulted off the tiny saddle and landed on his feet like an acrobat. Leading his snorting and trembling horse through these towering firs and the mass of troops around this clearing, he strode toward the king's vibrant banner with great confidence and with one hand gripping his buckskin satchel. This uncommon man tied his fabulous mount to a nearby tree and then fell to his knees at the apron to the king's bivouac, swept the floppy hat from his head and stuck out his chest and its gleaming badge of office. As expected by all who watched, this man then proudly outstretched his arm, displaying the intricate tattoo on the back of his right hand of this king's own venerated ancestor, and before then addressing Caswallawn without preamble.

"The gŵyrd and the carbads have returned your majesty as instructed. They are assembling at the rear as we speak lord and are almost ready!" This small but wiry man informed Caswallawn calmly and succinctly before rising, and he bowed to him once more, sweeping the leaves of the ground with his floppy hat flamboyantly before withdrawing to his duties, and Caswallawn smiled like a shark in his wake, stirring himself.

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As he watched the furious digging of this great circle by his men and the dozens of felled trees being dragged toward it by teams of horses, Caesar was unsatisfied as to today's progress; or more accurately the lack thereof, and there were at least three or four hours of daylight left. Calling his officers over to him, he outlined his extempore plan and why he was ordering a large reconnaissance force of almost two thousand men to assemble outside the boundary to this new and temporary encampment. It would be led by him, as he desired to discover the main route west and

then north to the Tamesa estuary before nightfall, and he felt sure it was nearby. In fact, he was convinced it lay behind those trees to his west and was determined to discover a route either around them or through them without further delay.

It had not taken them long to traverse this western treeline, and a forward scout had soon pointed out their route through these trees ahead of them and a decent looking road contained by a ditch and an undulating hedgerow to each side. Caesar and the vanguard of these four cohorts were deep into these woods and a good way along this excellent road when a shout went up from behind them and at the ranks of the distant rearguard. There was a perceived consternation at the tail end of this long rectangular block made up of three columns of marching men and among the rearmost ranks, who were just entering the fringes of this forest nine hundred yards behind the general and his officers. A faded but still audible call from a buccinator in their distant camp gave some further clue as to the source of those legionaries' concerns and which was now fully a mile behind their officers in the van. Calling a halt, Caesar and his closest officers galloped to the rear to assess this disturbance, and what he saw shocked him. The Prittanic charioteers had returned unannounced to come streaking from those trees again, and with whooping horsemen riding between them, they were charging his distant men. The Prittans were attacking his hugely unfinished military camp, and it was a complete surprise to Caesar and all his men. As those barbarians clattered into the open at full tilt, charging flat out from three closing directions, Caesar's face hardened in surprise as his camp was about to be besieged. Infantry could be seen amassing at those fringes too now and Cassivellaunus it seems had chosen to do precisely what he was not expected to do. He was clearly making an all-out assault on that temporary and largely unformed bastion, and Caesar's standards and his eagles were suddenly at risk. That Prittanic monarch had obviously decided on a switch in tactics and a decisive confrontation, and it had caught him completely by surprise. However, Caesar's eyes became shrewd as he considered his enemy's poor timing, seeing that Cassivellaunus had clearly committed a

fatal error. Thanking Fortuna for the blunder of his enemy and roaring out his order to about turn, Caesar led his men back to camp at the gallop, heading southeast and directly back toward that scant, circular foundation in the purple heather and to where his men were beginning to stand to. It was merely a ring ditch backed by a three-foot tall berm presently, but thankfully and due to the ineptitude of his enemy, it would not need to protect his shortly embattled reserves and his standards for very long at all.

Sadly, Military Tribune Quintus Laberius Durus had been killed leading the valiant defence of their fledgling fortress by the time they got back to it. However, his enemy's mistake, Caesar's experience, his quick reactions and his timely return had dissuaded these Prittans from carrying out the complete overrunning of their camp, as was obviously their intent. The ranks of advancing barbarian foot soldiers had about faced at some calls from their strange horns and were now running back to the safety of their woods. A mounted battle still raged on around his tightly locked formations with those dangerous Prittanic chariots. His mood darkened as he thundered around the furious defences of this fledgling stronghold on his own mount. The fighting around the dark and still damp perimeter trench had become ferocious with enemy cavalry and chariots wheeling around it in dizzying and hard to follow routines, and his legionaries were suffering heavily at the circular fringe above and behind that shallow ditch and its berm. Those front ranks paid the highest price, fighting against a dismounted enemy whilst struggling against the debilitating weight of their own superior armour and the dense, grasping roots of this cloying heather underfoot. However, Caesar split a phalanx of this enemy cavalry with a direct charge of his own, forcing an avenue to his beleaguered men with his own elites, whilst a supporting charge by six hundred of his Gallic auxiliaries swept around a dense stand of trees to the south to protect his flank. With the use of sound Roman tactics and obedience, Caesar's troops were abruptly united, and this surprise but flawed attack by the Prittans was driven off completely. Had they allowed him to pass through that forest to the west and let him put some distance between his

reconnaissance force and this encampment, Caesar felt sure the Prittans could have overwhelmed this circular ditch with ease and would have slaughtered all his men before he could have returned to reinforce it. He was heartily relieved at their untimely error, as it could have resulted in calamity and the complete loss of his banners and his eagles. His men and this encampment were safe now however and so were his standards, but he had learned a salutary lesson himself here this day, as these barbarians were not the mindless and fatally predictable tribesmen he had faced on his last visit. Regardless of this particular error in their judgement and especially their timing, they had become organised, and Caesar knew he had to rethink his whole strategy. As he surveyed the circular but now fading battle around him he was forced to admit that the Prittans did indeed learn quickly, especially in the rotation of their troops for relief and their immediate withdrawal at a given signal. This was no mean feat from an assembly of uncivilised tribes, and it surprised him. It was the ordered disengagement of the first of those ferociously embattled, frontline warriors that had impressed him the most, as he knew just how difficult that was even with highly trained and professional troops. The way their troops were able to disengage, remount their chariots and speed away whilst others dismounted to take their places spoke of much organised practice and repetition. Their infantry too had learned to engage and disengage on command, and without that clearly *adopted* ability to disengage a battalion in some kind of order, the timely assembly and deployment of any relief force would be undermined and completely wasted. However, these Prittans had clearly absorbed and had practised these Romanised, 'new world' tactics to their own clear advantage. It was clear to Caesar too in retrospect that these barbarians had spent a great deal of time rehearsing these rotational, substitutional manoeuvres, and it was obviously something else he had taught them on his first visit. That sobering thought took his attention from this battle, which was petering out now, and he began to reevaluate his enemy anew.

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Caswallawn was furious as he led his army away from *Rhôs y Rhôsyn*, as although almost a thousand Romans had been killed and more than a hundred enemy cavalymen lay slaughtered, the flawed attack had come at a far greater cost to him. The incalculable part of this expense to him were the results of this quickly and finely wrought but failed plan, over and above the sobering number of his losses. Had it been executed in a proper manner and at the correct time, only the Gods knew what calamities this sudden assault could have caused their enemy had it been properly sprung and victory achieved. His Brythonic troops could have swarmed that alien, circular scratch in the heather with ease, decimating the enemy's foot soldiers without the support of their cavalry. They could have taken those garish banners for trophies and their golden eagles for scrap and the day, even this war could have been won. They could undoubtedly have destroyed that ridiculous, abhorrent construction on the red moor forever, ending Caesar's invasion in all probability and Caswallawn was visibly infuriated at the grave error of his nobles. The crestfallen gŵyrd of Lloegr were silent and shamefaced around their king, as all were deeply aware of where the blame for that uncoordinated and failed attack lay. Everybody knew that they should have waited until Caesar had been allowed to pass through the trees and travel much further into the woods before springing the trap, but his gŵyrd had pushed forward too eagerly to the treeline, burning in their anticipation of the possibly decisive battle to come. Caswallawn had seen that the highly embellished, eye-catching vehicles of his impatient lords and ladies had been spotted by the Roman scouts on the moor, and if he had failed to let them go immediately, the element of surprise would have been lost. So, he had been forced into a snap decision, releasing them early to the assault on the encampment but against his better judgement. Caesar's rearguard men had not fully departed and had become aware of what was unfolding on the moor behind them, ruining his ad-hoc plan of attack completely. Caswallawn now rued this latest capitulation to his gŵyrd, and he cursed himself as it was not like him. As he surveyed his fallen dead on this broad expanse of heather from the trees which was now turning to

the colour of ripe plums as the evening approached, he swore to himself that he would bow to no more pressure, and there would be no more lobbying or arguing for this position or another from anyone. From now on, his gŵyrd would follow his instructions to the letter and with no discussion whatsoever or a few more Brythons may perish this night, adding to the one thousand four hundred and forty-eight bodies of his lost combrogi he was staring at now with an unconcealed fury. The sum of his deeply resented losses this day lay where they had fallen, still surrounding that great circular fort the Romans were scratching out of that heather blanketed moorland with much more energy and vigour since battle's end. That Roman construction, rising slowly from the distant earth ahead of him was crammed with his enemy, but they were dug in now like tics on a Belgic sheep, and so he turned away. His lugubrious nobles turned away with him, leaving Rhôs y Rhôsyn to the Romans and to the dead, as they had a sacred estuary and the brother of this king's dun to fall back to and to protect.

Aber Tafwys would be another huge challenge in the days or weeks to come, promising many more tests of his tactical brilliance, and Caswallawn's thoughts returned to the 'game in hand' on his mental bone board as he rode away to their next encampment among these dense trees. The decision facing him now was an onerous one, and one which may well decide the outcome of this war. His werrin army had been battered thin by the demands he had made of them already, and it was beginning to tell. The harvest was just around the corner, and if he failed to release them for that essential undertaking, all southern Prydein would starve this coming winter. With very little left to fight Caesar's ordered ranks with, his werrin would become a burden to these elite mobile forces remaining, continuing to be many mouths to feed at great difficulty, and so he decided to send them home. Caswallawn felt no satisfaction at their release, as he knew it would take a toll on the morale of the remaining aristocrats and raise the hazard, but more importantly perhaps, those nobles will have far fewer servants and slaves to do their bidding.

However, he had one more task for his *werrin army* before he released them.

Inside an hour, Caswallawn was scowling still as he took his seat facing the roaring new fire in this glade and in his comfortable campaign chair. His lords and ladies gathering around it were just going to have to get their hands a little dirtier from now on Caswallawn thought as he settled into the comfortable folding chair. As he relaxed in this bespoke travelling chair of considerable quality and received warm mead from an arwein in his brimming, silver rimmed and lidded horn cup, Caswallawn reconsidered his tactical options now that the Romans had decided to reinforce and consolidate that camp on the red moor. A static garrison needs supplies, and so Caesar and his men were going to need food, but they were going to need water above all else, just to survive in a fort with no well and no nearby stream. In view of this, Caswallawn would need the power of daylight and his *werrin army* to punish Caesar and his men tomorrow for this oversight. His *werrin army* will need to travel to a new ambush point at first light so that they are prepared and ready at the chosen location when the time comes. Tonight yet, there was this vital war council to command and oversee before they could all retire for the night, and Caswallawn stifled a yawn. He was truly exhausted this night, but he was damned if he would let it show, and sinking the large and spectacular horn of mead with a loud belch he drew this war council quickly to order around this big fire as his bracken was calling.

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Not long after a pale and diffused dawn had brought the colour back to this vibrant moor, Caesar gave his General Gaius Trebonius command of a vital mission. He was to lead three legions and all his cavalry on a much-needed foraging expedition as the food and the water had fallen lower than morale. As the ring ditch deepened and its encircling palisade rose atop the fresh berm to either side of the hastily-built but nonetheless impressive gatehouse, the men's spirits bounced back. One large timber gate had been nailed together to make an entrance to this *Alesian* type

fort, which somewhat mirrored its vast, circular counterpart twenty miles away on the coast. His men's morale had risen along with a weak sun and this raw palisade this morning as it grew and added to their security, but they had all paused at their jobs, and their eyes had stared northwest after Trebonius and the departing legions longingly, many licking dry lips in anticipation as they knew water to be just over those hills to the north. A favourite of Caesar and a dire enemy to *his* enemy Cato, General Trebonius had decided to back Caesar's triumvirate last year. In his opposition of Cato five years previously and during his term as *quaestor*, Trebonius had forced an act through the senate granting Spain to Pompey. It had also approved Crassus' rule of Syria for an additional five years, strengthening their political *triumvirate* and allowing Caesar's consul partners to recruit more soldiers, both at home and in the provinces. In a fine demonstration of mutual backscratching, Caesar had Trebonius elevated to Legate just this previous year, and he was now a staunch and capable ally. Every thirsty soldier watching that glittering general, his three legions and all their cavalry departing for the coast was confident of their success, and confident too that they will all be drinking cool and sweet water by day's end.

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"Artus! Get those men with the amphorae moving. I don't wish to tarry here longer than is necessary." General Trebonius barked out to his *primus pili* before turning to his tribune. "I don't like the atmospherics here Domitus. My nerves are tingling, and you know what that means!" The general growled to Gnaeus Domitus Calvinus, his senior military tribune, and this experienced man nodded lugubriously beside him, aping his general and sweeping his own gaze across these marshes and the same fringes of encroaching enemy forest. Although they had both been delighted at finding this alluring minor estuary which had winked at them enticingly from between the trees for miles as they approached, this cleared land around it was just a little too small for comfort. The dense trees pressed in on both sides and far too near for the general's liking,

especially with deep running water delimiting this dead ended gulley, but their scouts had located this bankside clearing and had confirmed the water's freshness. So, as their needs were great, General Trebonius had ordered his men forward. This river, which apparently gives tribute to the great Tamesa to the north is known by the locals as their *Avon Medways*, and the low stretch of ground adjoining it offered a broad and level approach to its waters. Trebonius knew that the often laborious and fraught task of watering many hundreds of horses would be greatly eased and accelerated by this accessible and wide bow in the river. More vitally, its ease of ingress had allowed the horses to be watered en masse, muddying the water at this fringe in shifts as they slaked their thirsts, making this riverside bank treacherous and slippery underfoot. Their *volones* were sent forward into this gloop with dozens of amphorae to be quickly filled at river's edge and resecured among the baggage, and it had been done in record time. It was this topography which had saved Trebonius the most time here today however, as this muddy marshland and its broad access to this slowly gliding river was wide enough to water twenty to thirty horses at a time, and they had all been thirsty.

The cavalry had all been watered in shifts by early afternoon. They had been ordered to withdraw to an eastern pasture less than half a mile away, and the general now watched the last of his officers at that curving and muddy bankside do the same for their own mounts with little patience. Despite the time it was taking, Trebonius watched with some small pleasure as that long line of horses' tails swished happily as they slaked their thirsts and drank deep at the lapping edge of this great river. His eyes kept flicking to the nearby lines of trees however, as he knew intuitively that they had overstayed their welcome and that this necessary period of immobility could prove fatal in this narrow riverine valley. The atmosphere of this long and constrained, marshy stretch of ground changed then abruptly, and all his men, his officers and their horses felt this subtle but unmistakeable shift in the ambience. The centurions started to bark out orders to fall in and to form up, but the rude blare of enemy war horns still caught them by surprise. The sudden and mass

assault by many hundreds of Prittanic warriors careering from trees to both sides confirmed their deep suspicions and the cause of the eerie silence which had descended on this whole area in the preceding minutes. In moments, Trebonius, his mounted officers and his infantry were under all-out attack to both flanks. The general and his glittering centurions however had seen this all before, and they were unruffled as they gave out their precise orders.

It was only the much-practiced parade marching excellence of his legions, his own tactical brilliance and the fact that he had *all* Caesar's cavalry with him which carried the day, and which allowed Trebonius and his men to survive what was clearly a well-planned and executed ambush, designed no doubt to wipe him out completely. The general had the foresight to prioritise the elites of this invasion force and station them to his rear once he had ordered them watered first. He had placed them there specifically to cover the east, and it must have come as quite a surprise to these barbarians when the full force of his cavalry had been revealed. As the enemy made a very bold and reckless attempt at the eagle of the 7th, almost two thousand cavalry elites had thundered from the eastern dust and had completely routed their attack. The Gallic cavalry along with their Roman elites had spilled a great deal of Prittanic blood once more, slaughtering many hundreds of the enemy's scruffy looking foot soldiers, many of which were armed with simple farming implements. Once routed, some bedraggled survivors had gained the security of one the nearest treelines but their attack had been utterly shattered, and the tattered remnants of their defeated bands dragged themselves from this bloody field.

General Trebonius was expansive in his congratulations and yet modest in receipt of the same. He knew this battle would have been hard fought if the Prittans had attacked when the cavalry was in tight formation and lined up at the river, and when it was vulnerable. It seems that these Prittans were both an impulsive and a leisurely lot, and it was their *late* arrival to battle which had cost them dearly on this occasion, and these

officers in the vanguard knew that Trebonius was pleased with the outcome. Caesar too, they were sure would be delighted at the repeated incompetence of their enemy, and at their own spontaneous victory, and the great man smiled as he surveyed his triumph from this riverside ground he had secured so efficiently. The battlefield around him was still now and littered with enemy dead, and he nodded with satisfaction, knowing that the numbers they represented would be a decisive if not a fatal blow to the barbarian enemy king. He nodded with pleasure to Calvinus before wheeling his horse away from the muddy, blood splattered, and body strewn marshlands before this river. Trebonius and his glorious legions rode and marched back to the darkening east and to their makeshift fortress on the purple downs, with freshwater slopping from the hundreds of full amphorae and broad smiles on his men's faces. His archers finally began to bag some useful game at the fringes of this forest, and as they returned under the setting of a blood red sun glimmering to their right and behind them, they all looked forward to a fine supper of celebratory honour.



Chapter Eleven.

Fro Elái was stunning in the rosy glow of this embryonic dawn, and although the royal guard were held far enough back from this river by strict orders, one extremely careful aristocrat had secreted himself soundlessly into the bushes on its bankside, and so that he could actually see his prey. He held his breath and remained perfectly still, weapon of choice in hand as this was the crucial point. This was the long-awaited moment when this deadly hunter would discover if his quarry would go for the bait, or perhaps his mark would perceive some flaw in its authenticity and move away.

Lludd had set out in the misty darkness hours ago to be here at this very moment, and now beset by cramp and besieged by clouds of midges, he refused to budge and stubbornly held his position, breathing deeply and evenly. His eyes narrowed sharply as he detected the slightest movement, mere *reeds* from his hiding place. His blue eyes blazed now in the growing light of this new dawn, and his hunter's spirit awoke with it. He was confident this morning, not just from his vast experience in all the terrible ways in which man can prepare ambush, but he was on home ground, knowing every inch of his chosen battleground and this beautiful stretch of *his* river Elái. At long last, the moment arrived. His enemy finally slid into view, and infinitely slowly Lludd lowered the long and slim, beautifully crafted rod of ash, and he gave the silk line dangling from its tip an expert flick with his left wrist. The frayed muddle of woollen fibres and the fragments of pheasant feather had been tightly bound around a sharp hook before being smeared with lanolin, and it made the slightest *plop* when it met the fast-flowing waters of the Elái. It was instantly gripped by the current, making the tip of Lludd's long rod quiver in a sympathetic rhythm, but his aim was true, and in a flash the artificial fly was gripped by something else entirely. Lludd's grin was a fierce one, as

the largest of the Elai's legendary brown trout had put a fine bow in his rod and was now thrashing around on the end of his silk line, firmly hooked by its fat and bulbous bottom lip. It was never going to be easy single handed, but Lludd had planned this event for several weeks, since he had spotted the huge fish glide past him one day when he was out walking his dogs, and he was well prepared for this momentous battle. The fight was long and courageous, but as expected, Lludd vanquished this king of fish. Up to his chest in rushing water, he landed it with a custom-made net strung around a wicker hoop. It had been especially made for him, with a grip which mirrored the handle of most Brythonic shields so that he could wield this finely knotted net with his rigid silver hand. In just a few short but furious minutes, a glossy, twelve-pound trout lay flapping in indignant surprise on this bank alongside a soaked but smiling Lludd, and he had caught his record fish.

The slow plod back to his capital fortress at the head of his guard was made through a most delightful glade. For an indulgent Lludd it was a ride of pure pleasure in the rising warmth of this day, his matchless prize hanging from his saddle for all to see and to wonder at. His farmer's fields around him were overflowing their boundaries with their crops, which were all approaching maturity as this summer steadily did the same. It was obvious that the harvest was not too far away across these islands of Prydein, and it was as well that this year's crop would be a bounteous one, as all these farmers knew that at least ten percent of their finished grain would be heading east to the beleaguered werrin of war torn Caint. All the Khumry's thoughts and hopes were directed toward the fraught southern coast of Lloegr in these warm and peaceful days, and to where many hundreds of their archers had gone in patriotic fervour. They had travelled to where one of Khumry's infamous sons and this famed high king's brother was furiously prosecuting another brave but controversial war against the Roman invaders. As Lludd clattered up the paved ramp to the tall main gates of his caer, he looked forward to a fine lunch before delivering this great fish to his taxidermist. Then he would have plenty of

time to bathe and to change before the arrival of an especially important and an extremely influential guest.

As a cool dusk descended softly outside, the great hall of *CaerAu* was filled with animated people, all talking across the tables to each other amid the detritus of a fabulous feast. The noise that ushered from them was loud, competing with the lively group of musicians in the corner with their fabulously gilded harps, their humped and polished *crwth*s and their inlaid bone pipes. The atmosphere here was relaxed and friendly, smoky and beery, and this long, stone-built thatch stood on the foundations of a truly ancient keep, the roots of which go back more than two millennia. *Lludd Llaw Ereint*'s hall reflected these ancient beginnings, as it too was far older than most people could comprehend. The carved roof posts were almost black with the soot of ages, as was the thatching held up by them. The colourful armorials mounted on the wall behind the broad dais, plotted the high king of *Khumry*'s ancestral precession back to King *Dyfnarth Fawr* himself, who ruled this *caer* almost three centuries previously, and that infamous warlord had been the great King *Beli Mawr*'s *hêngorendaïd*. The earlier armorials, tracing *Lludd*'s ancestry back to Prince *Brutus* of *Troy*, the high king and the ever-honoured procreator of the *Brythons* were long lost in the sundered keeps which had been built and rebuilt here on *Bryn Au*, three or more times in the intervening centuries, but nobody knew for sure how many previous palaces were etched into these ancient foundations. *Lludd*'s great hall was just the latest in a long line of *CaerAu*'s thatched constructions on this truly ancient and utterly sacred location, but it had been well built and would stand that same lengthy and arduous test of time. The top table on the large dais at the head of this hall was a more serious affair than the festive atmosphere among the long rows of tables before it, as the guest sitting alongside their king this evening was a taciturn man by reputation, and his lineage and his legend had taken *Lludd*'s bards almost an hour to recite. So, General *Cadallan ap Cadall*; honorary *Pendragon* of the Roman war and the infamous ruler of the *Carfetau* was a much-welcomed guest in this capital fortress tonight, rising as it did from the very heart of glorious

Essyllwyr in southern Khumry. The six, large framed and hugely respected gŵyrd of the *leaping-deer* who had accompanied their general on his long southwestern journey, as they did everywhere were gathered around a large table to the right of this great hall. They were all cramming their faces with the meat and the ale on offer as the voyage by sail to Khumry from Breged and the subsequent two-hour gallop had left them ravenous.

The quiet talk at this top table inevitably got around to their host's illustrious but embattled brother, and Cadallan was surprised by the heat of the response to his polite enquiry, as it became clear that Lludd was privately quite furious with his brother. In deep and low discussion, both men came to realise that their thoughts on Caswallawn's *northern exclusion* were identical, both men rueing Caswallawn's rash hubris, especially in the face of the overwhelming evidence which had been put before him prior to the invasion. Even first-hand reports from impeachable sources on the ground as to what precisely was sailing north across the channel to invade them had not swayed him. Both these stellar men were in the position to perceive the lasting damage this exclusion had done to the *undeb* of Prydein; a holy alliance which had secured their stunning victory last year. Even the word 'unity' had become a joke to the northern Brythons now, as their southern countrymen were surely as isolated as any alliance of tribes had ever been. These two men possessed complex lines of communication and loyal agents across this country and Gallia, being the envy of many minor kings in this regard, and both were well-aware of developments across southern Lloegr. As the arwein rushed about them refilling empty cups with mead and empty logs with beer, Lludd and Cadallan leaned closer in.

"I'm told your brother was wise in not opposing that *gwain* Caesar on the beach as he would surely have been flanked to either side, and it would have been a bloodbath." Cadallan rumbled quietly, and his regal host nodded in response.

"Indeed, he is not a complete fool general, but I think the actual size of the fleet surprised him. Oh, we all knew the numbers, but it's a different

thing seeing that monstrous fleet for yourself Cadallan, as I did in Porth Bonon.” Lludd answered him lugubriously.

“Ay, they must have blocked the southern horizon from east to west when they arrived.” Cadallan opined with a distant look, sounding disappointed that he had missed the sight himself. “The relief of CaerCelgwern was well done though, especially as the Roman caught them all on the hop!” The general chuckled, seeing in his mind perhaps the panicked rushing about of Caswallawn’s men when they realised that Caesar had not even waited one night before setting out to conquer. “It is a shame that storm two weeks ago wasn’t strong enough to cause more substantial damage to his fleet, but I hear he has been allowed to build a great fortress around his ships on that beach now!” Cadallan queried with an arched eyebrow.

“Perhaps *allowed* is a little harsh Cadallan, as without the northern triad and the unity we so desperately needed and of course your leadership, there was little anyone could do to prevent him landing his troops without unsupportable loss.” Lludd complimented him but spoke plainly, nonetheless. “You haven’t seen the incredible weaponry on those ships nor the damage they can do general, and the numbers of enemy soldiers involved made it far too perilous to consider all-out, frontal assault. No Cadallan, there is little that could have been done sadly since the exclusion apart from slowing Caesar down to much Brythonic loss, and I think my brother is wisely husbanding his resources for the moment, especially following the flawed battle on Rhôs y Rhôsyn which so sorely depleted his forces. It was quickly followed as you know by that debacle near the afon Medwas against Trebonius’ foraging force, and which virtually destroyed the rest of my brother’s seasoned werrin soldiers.” Lludd added tonelessly, staring straight ahead with unfocused eyes.

“I know Lord Lludd, my agents tell me the same. They report a great number of serious Brythonic losses there to the Roman bastard!” Cadallan rumbled pointedly and with little grace, but Lludd too was a military officer and appreciated the man’s no-nonsense approach as it saved so much time.

“My brother’s opening gambit, with his punitive attack on their cavalry was well done and entirely to good effect in my opinion Cadallan, planning on drawing the enemy into ambush the following day as we all expected. Then Caesar makes camp of all things and begins founding that bloody fortress on Rhôs y Rhôsyn. Caswallawn must have been as confused as I was when I heard about it. Nevertheless, he took the opportunity offered by the Roman and decided on a lightning attack on their incomplete enclosure, but by all accounts, something went very wrong. One of Caesar’s vaunted officers was killed in the defence of that circular scratch in the heather so I’m reliably informed, as were many hundreds of his bloody soldiers, but the flanking manoeuvre by Caesar’s cavalry was a stroke of genius. He deploys them so swiftly and so accurately Cadallan you would not believe it, and they respond to his orders so rapidly, they are quick to envelop and destroy foot soldiers and even unwary charioteers.” Lludd took a deep draught of the excellent beer as he paused here, and Cadallan nodded at Julius Caesar’s widely known distinction in all matters martial, as it was becoming the wisdom of the age. Cadallan remained unsurprised as he sat beside his royal host, as he knew well that cavalry had been deadly to infantry for as long as men had ridden horses. He too took a drink in this lull and stayed silent, as he felt Lludd had more to tell.

“You know Cadallan, I believe that cursed yellow dog has some innate sense in battle. Beyond all expectation he sent *all* his cavalry with Trebonius’ foraging party, catching Caswallawn’s ambushade at Aber Medwas out completely, especially as they were stretched so thin to begin with. I know they turned up late, and as Caswallawn was not there to marshal them, they wasted precious time arguing as to who would take the van!” Lludd fell silent again here, shaking his head at his countrymen’s legendary ability to turn any simple decision into an extended saga of argument and counter-argument. He chuckled darkly to himself before continuing bitterly. “Can you imagine taking such a bold and risky step as to send *all* your mounted professionals away from your encampment before it is even built? I cannot figure out that *gwain’s*

thought processes, as he does the most unpredictable things for a military leader of such global renown. Again, leaving his unfinished encampment vulnerable transpired to be the right thing to do, as compared to the consequences of a properly sprung ambush on Trebonius and the mass assault awaiting him the following day, the Roman *dog* was able to draw my brother's forces out and almost decimate them. Had Caswallawn decided to attack that ludicrous fort on the moor again rather than Trebonius' force at the Medwas, things could have been very different. The whole sad affair was almost decisive too sadly, and Caswallawn's men and women suffered some appalling losses in the debacle. It could have been so different had things gone to plan on both occasions." Lludd rued darkly, securing his guest's undivided attention.

"Mm, but we both know do we not Lord Lludd, that nothing goes entirely to plan in battle." The pendragon growled in response, and Lludd had to laugh. He toasted Cadallan with another great mouthful of the beer as the general continued thoughtfully. "Your brother by all accounts has not enough experienced foot soldiers in his front lines now and would have been forced to rely heavily on the werrin army reserves to face Caesar again. He made a very wise decision in releasing them from the war as the harvest is crucial, but he now has to rely completely on his lords and ladies with their chariots. If only he had rescinded the northern exclusion while he still had time, my people and all Breged would be there now, as would Albion and Galedon I'm sure, and together we could expel the Roman dog once and for all! However, I fear your brother no longer has the manpower to banish that jaundiced cur and is now forced to dance with the rogue!" Cadallan grimaced at this, not wanting to insult his guest or his embattled brother, but that southern king's mistakes and his appalling decisions were now beginning to bear black fruit across all Lloegr. Cadallan was too known as a man who spoke his mind in any and all company. He felt welcome here to do just that and free to air his views, which Lludd clearly appreciated.

“Believe me Cadallan, I have tried everything to persuade him to change his mind, but once he has set his mind on something it would be easier to move a mountain. He has always been stubborn to a deeply frustrating, nose bleeding fault throughout our lives, and our last discussion on the matter became so heated, I had to take my leave before one of us said something unforgiveable to the other.” Lludd informed him, omitting the fact that both brothers had made an inviolate oath to their father when he was alive. All Beli Mawr’s sons had been required to take this oath on their twelfth birthday, and they had sworn on their hearts to their God Camulo and on their knees to their father on his sunburst throne in CaerBeli. In his white blossomed courtyard and before the whole assembled family they had each taken the public *dragon’s oath*, in that none would ever take arms against another sibling. This hereditary edict had been carved into Brythonic law generations earlier by Leir himself and for obvious reasons. The *dragon’s oath* took precedence over all others in Beli’s line, and it always would.

“I hadn’t realised it had come to that Lord Lludd.” Cadallan shook his head sadly. “It is a sadness, but I’m sure after the war you two will sort your differences out.”

“I hope so too Cadallan, but he has tested our fraternity to the limit with his damn oath-breaking.” Lludd shook his head again and took another drink.

“Caesar is free now to attack Aber Tafwys and your dun Lord Lludd, and should Caesar sunder those defences which I know you have both struggled long and hard to erect, he would be free to invade Trinobanta and lay waste to Afarwy’s land, far more effectively than your brother ever has!” Cadallan proposed this alongside him, deadpan, and Lludd laughed loudly as the truth in the big man’s droll words was obvious.

It was clear that these two great men were enjoying each other’s gregarious company in this busy and suddenly happy feasting hall, as laughter was often like alluvial gold; it trickled downwards.

“He still has our amazing Khumric archers Cadallan, a few hundred seasoned spearmen and women, and over three thousand charioteers left in his host, so Caesar won’t have it all his own way, but I do agree, my brother is no longer in a position to drive Caesar from our shores, if he *ever* was. That yellow dog is now free to attempt a crossing of Arglwydd Tafwys and perhaps even put my dun, Brutus’ old palace to the torch!” Lludd spat this out with vehemence, and his silver hand thumped loudly to the table from his anger, causing the laughter around this hall to die in a heartbeat. An ominous silence fell inside this great thatched building at that precise moment, many hard eyes immediately turning to their king on the dais in question. Their king’s grin was a wicked one in response as he waved them all to continue with his living hand, pleased that his people were attentive even after all the mead and the ale, as this was after all a *warlord’s* great hall. This instantaneous tension drained away from his warriors just as swiftly, like spilled beer, and the laughter in this great hall returned like noisy surf to a pebble beach. With another satisfied slurp of his excellent beer and with his eyes twinkling, Lludd turned back to his guest with a shrug, but his dangerous smile lingered. “Oh, I can soon repair my fortress and rebuild my toll bridge once Caesar has taken his leave, but I tell you Cadallan, my brother and I fell out about his treatment of Afarwy too as I was part of the oath to support him, made only last year. My brother’s constant incursions over Afarwy’s borders are breaking *my* oath and adding immeasurably to the problem!” Lludd groaned his frustration out as the sound around them returned to its previous, muted roar. The owner of CaerLludd and that newly completed harbourside citadel, illegally founded in Afarwy’s Trinobanta completely ignored the irony of his own words, and his guest alongside him remained silent as this was not his affair, and his celebrated host knew that Cadallan had come here for an entirely different purpose. Due to his constant testing of Trinobanta’s borders however, Caswallawn’s relationship with Afarwy had deteriorated to where they could not be in each other’s company, adding to the animosity between Lludd and his brother as they had both made oaths in a trading alliance with Afarwy.

Lludd was sure Caswallawn was about to invade Trinobanta before the Roman set sail from Bononia and scuppered his plans, but he held onto this revealing bit of knowledge as there was no need to divulge it to his Carfetan colleague. Cadallan kept to the subject for the time being anyway and just nodded, biding his time clearly and awaiting the right time to bring up his own agenda.

“Should the defences at the only real fording place at the Tafwys fail and your dun fall Lord Lludd, at least your brother’s enormous capital should serve him well in the coming weeks, as the Roman couldn’t possibly know of its location. It will make a fine and secure rallying point should Caesar then break north.” Cadallan proposed this tactical analysis, making his host smile thinly.

“I doubt it Cadallan. I am deeply concerned about the defensive abilities of our traditional hillforts and our palisaded bangors, as against the most successful army on this planet their failings are becoming apparent. Once encircled by an organised and armoured force, they become inescapable death traps. We were lucky with CaerCelgwern as it has a unique avenue of escape, but I fear for Caswallawn if he is backed into CaerGwlyb regardless of its size and the complexity of its defences. If Caesar discovers him there, I fear it could prove catastrophic for my brother and his people. We must hope that Caesar will tire of charging around a scorched and denuded country smelling permanently of smoke and with no food left anywhere. We must also hope and pray that the yellow dog will bore of being stalked by my brother and his people, and who will continue to destroy his invasion troops at will, those who are careless, with his archers and his charioteers and with his notorious hit-and-run tactics!”

Cadallan nodded, sharing this hope, and as the remnants of the meal were cleared away and sweetmeats brought in, he proposed a toast.

“Then to your brave brother Lord Lludd; to Caswallawn Fawr, and may he repel the Roman *gwain* from the Tafwys and soon achieve a resounding

victory!” The general rumbled and Lludd joined him, both men drinking deeply. As they wiped their moustaches, Cadallan took his opportunity.

“I’m sure you have heard of our little problem in Breged Lord Lludd?” He enquired casually of his host, who nodded seriously in response beside him.

“Did that little shit really poison his father for the throne?” Lludd arched an eyebrow at the general, who shrugged his huge shoulders and grimaced.

“Pff who knows! They talk of outside agents and even of some mysterious magician who has just as mysteriously vanished, but I am deeply suspicious of the whole affair Lord Lludd. Cartysman’s true and obvious grief at the public poisoning of his father was backed up by the priesthood and all who witnessed it, and also by the testimony of two very senior gŵyr, both being landed tumon. However, in my concerned opinion, yes, very likely he did poison his father for the throne, as it would be just like him, the worthless little toad.” Cadallan growled and the gravel was thick in his words. “And Morwena, that feral little wife of his was up to her scheming neck in it, so were those two duplicitous gŵyr, I’d wager my best horse on it!” He added, his upper lip and one impressive moustache twisting in distaste.

“Ay, I have heard about that ambitious little vixen of the Paurisau Cadallan, but patricide and regicide for a throne? It’s a bit old fashioned to say the least!” Lludd grinned, and Cadallan roared with laughter beside him.

“Only twenty years out of date if you believe the rumours about Cartysman’s partner in crime King Afyn of the Coritanau! He bumped his tad Follysion off for the *viper* throne, that much I know, but I can’t prove it of course or that little snake would already be worm food and my current problem would be halved!”

"If those two reckless fools invade northern Casufelawny whilst my brother is at war with a foreign enemy there will be hell to pay Cadallan, you do realise this?" Lludd asked him with a serious look.

"Of course. The full consequences of that are well known to me, and I am doing my utmost to avert any further *accidental* incursions over your brother's borders. My men are on Coritana's southern border now, and Iddel's men are arriving there tomorrow. We know who has been attacking DunBorthmyn so savagely and I have a personal score to settle with that ugly snake, so I can assure you Lord Lludd, there will be no more cross border raiding into northern Casufelawny with impunity!" Cadallan swore, and his blazing eyes supported the oath.

"Excellent! I will confirm this with my brother's gŵyrd, and I'm sure he will be much relieved and grateful Cadallan. I thank you sincerely on his behalf." Lludd held up the cup and they both drank deep again. "Then once the druids appoint the contenders for the throne challenge of Breged, your problems with Cartysman and Afyn will be over will they not?" Lludd proposed this once he had drained the cup.

Cadallan looked as if he was about to curse at this logical suggestion, but he just shook his big head in response as he put his log down to the tabletop. With a loud, appreciative belch and a flamboyant swipe of his moustaches, Cadallan seemed to calm himself and he turned once more to his host. "My problems with that power hungry snake Afyn will never be over Lord Lludd, but he *will* crawl back under his rock when faced with mine and Iddel's troops, of that I can assure you. Cartysman however is a different matter, as that lying little rogue will not give up the rod to our druids and has *assumed* the rheolwr y grym!" He admitted quietly, averting his gaze, and Lludd could not help but laugh.

"Then he really is a young fool Cadallan, as your priests will pronounce the *nacâd*; the 'refusal', and you know what will surely then follow. Khumry's arch-druids will then inevitably declare a *cychwyn* should Cartysman refuse to return the rod immediately to Breged's druids, calling

out the *aer y derwydd* to Breged, and the whole world knows what happens then!" Lludd stated darkly, not needing to expand on that fraught event at all, as the 'fire of the druids' have remained unbeaten and unopposed throughout their long and glorious history. They assemble and respond only to this sacred, ritual declaration of the dreaded *cychwyn*, and should this deeply feared 'rise' be declared by the national council of druids, the very foundations of Breged will be shaken by the repercussions. The Gorddofican aristocracy of the Khumry have evolved over recent generations to be the military might of the druids across Prydain. Nynniaw, the number one sword champion of all five kingdoms had been the *benadwr* of this ancient military order. However, since his shocking death at the hands of the unprincipled Caesar in the previous war, Lludd was now the 'leader' of the *Aer y Derwydd*. It would be *his* men who would be ordered north into the mainland on holy orders, and it would be the notorious 'Black' Essyllwyr, led by him who would storm into Breged to right this great religious wrong. All in Prydain would know that Cartysman's days on this earth would, from that moment on be numbered in single figures.

"It is why I am here Lord Lludd" Cadallan said simply and with a serious nod.

"I see, but if we do get holy orders Cadallan and the Essyllwyr go to war under their black mantles and behind their black shields, there is no stopping them. Once under the sacred orders of our priesthood they are like a druid's fire arrow; you just aim and shoot. There is no running after them and trying to stop or deflect them Cadallan. My *Black* Essyllwr under holy orders are just that, they are simply an arrow of death once committed. You would do well to resolve this issue Cadallan before it gets to such a precipitous situation, as all Breganta may burn from my sacred fire should Cartysman refuse his sacrosanct duty and should the tribes fail to comply with the curfew I shall impose upon them. I hope you will remain in Carfeta with your men if he does." Lludd added with a rough

edge to his deep voice, but he did not look up to meet the general's gaze as he had no need to.

"It goes without saying that the Carfetau would never interfere with the *Aer y Derwydd* Lord Lludd. So, should Cartysman seal his own doom in that way, I plan to resolve the issue of Coritana to the south on my return, and by calling out the werrin army. Ergo, I must seek your advice on the protocols of calling out the *Corionototau*, as your blessed father was so instrumental in keeping their glory alive. As I know each detail must be correct and done in the right order before the 'Horn of Bran' is revealed, I was hoping you could assist me and confirm the procedure?" Cadallan asked his host this politely, and Lludd's eyes widened at this dangerous proposal, as the Horn of Bran had not been blown and the 'people's militia of Breged' had not been subsequently summoned in more than two centuries. The act was thought to be so fraught with ancient rite and strict protocol, it would take no less a person than a fully trained dewin or an arch-druid to unravel and safely complete the procedure. It was luck perhaps or forward thinking on the general's part that this man sitting next to him was the brif-dewin of all Prydein and could perform those arcane rites blindfold. Unknown to this visiting general however, Lludd had recently been in serious war council with his brother Llefelys in Gwened, discussing this very issue and how the *Horn of Bran* could be prepared for such an event. King Afyn of Coritana and young King Cartysman of Breganta's new, tyrannical and illegitimate regime across a great swath of Breged had disturbed some venerated druids in the motherland. This heinous act had infuriated some immensely powerful deities if rumours were to be believed. Cartysman's refusal to adhere to protocols so ancient they were thought to have been brought here by Partholóin himself were dire indeed. His criminal possession of the *llath y gallu gwyn* of Breganta, being ancient Khumric war plunder transpired to be a problem of such national and spiritual magnitude, many important priests from Khumry and beyond had given it an infinitely greater priority than anything else, including the foreign invasion of lowly Caint and Trinobanta. The Horn of Bran must be activated or nothing will happen, and so, much gold and

many brave men had been risked in the preparation of that highly secret endeavour, and Lludd was gratified by latest reports from his spies in those midlands, regardless of their warnings that the whole territory was on the brink of civil war. Receiving too detailed reports from his brother in Gwened, Lludd was satisfied that their orders had been carried out to the letter by those fiercely brave, indentured professional engineers. Lludd's eyes sparkled in this smoky gloom, and he grinned dangerously again as he turned to his guest.

"The calling out of the Corionototau has been long in consideration already Cadallan it may surprise you to know." He told the general this quietly, pleased at the surprise on his rugged face. "My brother Llefelys and I have carried out some rather bold preparations in that regard, and if we are going to reactivate Bran's great war horn after all these years, I rather think you will need me to come along Cadallan old chap, as the procedure is a little tricky!" Lludd informed him obliquely, and Cadallan's wolfish grin at that moment matched his own.

As one of his host's gŵyr drew Lludd aside to speak to him quietly, Cadallan took the time to assess this fearsome man sitting at his side, and who would now add his incalculable weight to the now precious but fledgling midland alliance. He recalled that monstrous, spirit wreathed citadel of CaerBraint in Môn where this man had trained and which Cadallan had visited as a boy. It had made a deep and enduring impression on him, and those stark memories were clear in his mind as he surreptitiously studied this impressive man alongside him. It was at that black and towering fortress overlooking Llanddona where Lludd had endured many mysterious and unknowable procedures to become not just any Dewin, but he became the out and out leader of those mysterious and Gods-touched wizard-warriors, and Cadallan doubted he could do the same. Whilst the druids were the masters of all ceremony, the ingenious and widely feared *dewin* focused on otherworldly matters, such as archaic magic and alchemy alongside the more human, secular business of anonymous assassination in all its myriad forms. The *otherworldly*

business of Prydein's widely feared dewin was the secret and truly ancient art of their innumerable and powerful *rhegau* and *swynau*, which were simply the tools of their trade. These curses and spells which took so long to master and at such ferocious personal cost ranged from *rheg y tywyll*; the awe-inspiring curse of 'darkening' a wide area, to *swyn-trymhau* which 'made heavy' an object or person. To a man, these Dewins of Prydein were acknowledged masters in the dark, insidious arts of blameless elimination, and Lludd Llaw Ereint was the chief among them. This unbeaten warrior of incalculable *bri* sitting next to Cadallan was a man of extraordinary knowledge and abilities was the ruler of all Khumry from this huge fortress, here in the heart of beautiful Essyllyria. The real black heart of this man's ancient and powerful order of the *Aer y Derwydd* was born in that dark and mysterious fortress on Môn's southeastern coast, of which Cadallan could recall every stark and terrifying feature sharp in his memory. There, in that high and black, palisaded hillfort live the wizards and alchemists, the tutors and the testers and all manner of monstrous teachers, who in their dark and collective genius produce the most accomplished killers of men on this earth; Prydein's dewin. To Cadallan's eternal good fortune, his host at this noisy but festive celebration in his honour was that order's benadwr and its *brif*-dewin, and he was a man of unknown powers. Now that this peerless, warrior-king-wizard alongside him was committed to his cause and would accompany him back to Breged, the weight seemed to fall from his shoulders, and Cadallan caught the eye of a passing arwein with a satisfied smile.



Chapter Twelve.

Gŵyr Garoch ap Crasgwn *Didostur* was indeed a 'merciless' man, as was his late father Crasgwn *Hyll*. He had been a blackhearted and ugly man who had served under the ruthless King Folsion and had gained a ferocious reputation. His son Garoch was just as widely feared for his casual cruelty but was also secretly derided for his inherited ugliness, which had over the years come to consume every aspect of this barbarous man. Serving that late king's equally terrible son Afyn who now possessed the throne and the crown of Coritana, this tribal leader's equally black heart and his twisted soul were reflected on his hideous countenance for all to see. His harsh features this cold and misty morning mirrored the stark and murderous deed he was about to perpetrate on some innocent and completely unaware civilians. The twitchy officers around this villainous man could see by the glint in the depths of his dark eyes that he was relishing the mindless slaughter that was about to ensue with a keen anticipation, but it was no surprise to any of these nervous men for they knew Gŵyr Garoch *Didostur* was a man who loved his work. These mounted officers in their black chest plates and matching hooded, black chainmail were to a man fast eyed and edgy around their leader as he was as unpredictable as he was cruel, and they feared him, which is exactly what their leader wanted. Garoch ran this brigade of *viper* warriors on two opposing principles; fear and reward. He was known however to be a man of dark and murderous strategy, and so none of these men around him knew from one week to the next which goal they were pursuing, as the rules were changed by their leader continually. This constant and highly stressful state of uncertainty showed on their pinched faces as they fidgeted on their hard army saddles in this dawn's early light, tensely awaiting their orders. They had been tasked to attack this sleepy market town, and they surveyed the approach now from these dew laden trees,

deep in enemy territory. With almost all their warriors away to the far south this whole Casufel valley was vulnerable, and Garoch was here to take full advantage of this all too enticing opportunity. DunBorthmyn was locked up and silent on its hilltop, wreathed in mist from the ground up to just short of the white, sharpened tops of its lower palisades. It looked ephemeral like the mystical fortress of the *gwyllion*, and it seemed to float like an island in this ghostly mist. One or two sleepy guards dragged themselves along the battlements in the shimmering light of this predawn, no doubt half asleep and longing for their relief. The presently invisible market town of Tref Borthmyn sprawled out below those drowsy men had been completely inundated by this mist in these dark hours, but a slight breeze was arriving with this strengthening daylight and it began to swirl through the shrouded streets of the town below that fortress now in wraithlike vortices. More circular, low and thatched outlines were slowly revealed to these dour men concealed in the nearby trees, and the moment was clearly upon them. Garoch the merciless gave one of his youngest officers a cynical smirk and nodded to him, giving him the honour, but done as if Garoch expected or dared him to fail. This pale young man gave a quiet command to a subordinate behind him and there was a flurry of activity behind these leaders. A moment later, the young penaig and a group of more than a dozen riders on their biggest horses broke from these trees, and that young officer led them at the gallop, down through the ankle-deep mist and toward the distant cattle stockades. Their chargers' hooves sounded like muted thunder, causing birds to explode out of their roosting places in the surrounding bushes and hedgerows, and prompting the dogs in the adjacent town to start a furious chorus of alarmed barking.

The flapping of the thick leather aprons strapped to these horses' chests made their own thumping tempo, but they came into use now as these highly trained horses crashed through the aged timber rails of this town's cattle stockade with ease, smashing them to splinters. Spreading out as they entered the huge, enclosed field and slowing to a canter, these mounted men began to herd these Casufelawny cattle into one

amorphous, steaming mass of shaggy russet hair and long curving horns. The cattle began to protest loudly at this rude awakening, but these men knew their business, and the livestock was lumbering toward the huge gap in the fence they had just made before any alarm went up, and long before the tall beacon was lit on the keep tower of that fortress. Muted light could be seen flashing now in the misty streets below the fort and as their sleepy inhabitants opened their doors to see what was afoot, many coming out of their thatches into this nascent dawn, drawn by the rising clamour. They could see nothing through this enveloping mist and so began to congregate and chatter nervously in small, incandescent groups on these streets with fluttering reed lamps in hand. Those nearest the cattle maes could hear what was happening however, and they began shouting with angry alarm as the mist began to clear and as they saw that their cattle were being raided.

The panic down in Tref Borthmyn was obviously infectious, drawing more and more of its frantic people out into the streets, but Gŵyr Garoch waited a little longer in these dripping trees, as he knew that great fortress on the hill would be slow in waking up and responding. The purposely loud manner of their cattle raid was having its desired effect, and Garoch's dark eyes hardened, as those streets were almost clear of this mist and were filling nicely now with concerned and protesting residents. This infamous gŵyr, surveying that unsuspecting Casufel town from these trees controlled the southern stronghold of CaerBwrd. His stronghold protected neighbouring Coritana's primary, defended marketplace known as Tref Ratau and it was a reaper of wealth, especially during the four main seasonal celebrations of the year. He governed that vassal fortress, the huge market in the town below it and the territories around it as if it were his own personal fiefdom, and he was feared far and wide within it. As his successful cattlemen were heading back toward him with the huge and moving mass of their prize, Garoch knew they would fetch a small fortune on the block at Ratau and had already earmarked the profits. As the beacon flared brightly atop the keep of DunBorthmyn and tiny figures

began dashing about its battlements, now fully awake, Garoch decided he had waited long enough and his bloodlust finally got the better of him.

“Feed the ravens! Slaughter them all!” He growled this at his men like an animal, spurring the black stallion under him with his eyes stark, and these bright-eyed officers around him did the same.

Three hundred of the merciless *viper* warriors of King Afyn’s Coritana galloped behind Gŵyr Garoch ap Crasgwn *Didostur* and into *stryd fawr* of Tref Borthmyn this morning, and the wide eyed werrin of Caswallawn’s most northerly town were ill prepared for such men. These pitiless warriors came thundering out of this ground mist like mounted phantoms of unannounced death, and they lived up to that terrifying image, charging down the main street and butchering anyone not quick enough to dodge away up a misty side street. The old and the young died in this same horrifying way, as these unpitying, deeply jaded killers chopped down with their infamously angled blades by rote, the horror being so commonplace to these dissolute men it barely touched them. The hot blood of their innocent victims splashed their dour and unflinching faces as they charged past in their murderous fury, and they were unmoved. This was one mad charge and a sweep around the market square, hacking at everything within their reach before slewing around in a great circle to escape and to flee with their valuable prize. As the fortress’ gates cracked loudly and began to swing open, these bloodthirsty raiders were already heading back the way they had come. A dozen or so brave and foolhardy locals had thrown some boxes and barrels down across the main street, and they stood behind their pathetic barricade now armed with nothing but garden implements. Their intention was to slow down these blood crazed horsemen, long enough perhaps for the chariots and their cavalry to charge down the ramp from the caer, and so that they may reach them in time to bring them to battle. The hope that DunBorthmyn’s mounted guard could catch these raiders was a forlorn one, as a few violent and crashing moments later there were local men and boys screaming and squirming on the ground, whilst a large gap had been ruthlessly punched

through their hopeless defences. There were many less targets on the return charge through Tref Borthmyn, but inevitably there were one or two elderly or infirm caught out in the open, and they were slaughtered just for the fun of it. None of the survivors would ever forget the terrifying visage of that hideous black demon who led this murderous band nor the tribe he represented, and Garoch *Didostur's* twisted and hate filled features would come back to haunt these people in their coming nightmares.

That undeclared Coritana *viper* brigade had vanished into the forest following their ill-gotten spoils, which were far enough ahead at this point to be secure, but the enraged warriors of DunBorthmyn came clattering down the town's main street in hot pursuit regardless. There were at least twenty carbads and three times as many riders in the host which chased those raiders, hammering through these streets and out toward the plundered pasture. They were goaded to bloody reprisal by the battered survivors of their town, and they spurred their mounts cruelly and cracked their stock whips down stryd fawr. The battle torn and blood splashed streets they thundered through caused such a resentful anger in these northern Casufels they lost their composure, and it became a race to vengeance. This long-forgotten kind of reckless, cross-border hostility, cattle raiding and headhunting was just unacceptable these days, and so, in the wake of their enraged posse, the town elders decided that this latest attack of such terrible consequence, and one which echoed a past era of nightmare to all their people would be the last.

The cavalry and the war vehicles of the Southern Brythons charged across the maes and through these forest roads they knew so well, but the border was close so they had to press on hard. Within half an hour they had left their northern treeline and had entered the borderland clearing which lay before the ancient, dried-up course of the afon Nian, which had shifted closer to DunBorthmyn long before living memory. This wide bow of that ancient river had been abandoned by Arglwydd Nian long ago, but an arid snake of quite different ground ahead of them was evidence of its

ancient route, and it remained as the boundary marker between these two nations. The land rose up behind this dry and meandering, tree lined trench, and the hill behind it was crowded with *eagle* warriors and vehicles of King Cartysman's Breganta. They held the high ground advantage, but they were not there to curb their Coritana allies, nor were they there to mediate in any way. The *eagles* of Breged were clearly there in support; to cover the *vipers*' retreat and to dissuade any pursuit over the border. This was the major boundary separating Lloegr from Breged and which was suddenly inviolate to those Bregedians, it infuriated this host of enraged southern Brythons. Their stolen cattle were being herded away in the distance before their eyes, heading into Breged and 'old enemy' Coritana, and that horde of black clothed murderers, being part of Afyn's *viperous* warriors cantered away in the self-assured and mocking arrogance of the victorious and the unassailable. Many of these charioteers and horsemen were all for crossing the border and wreaking their vengeance on those conceited Coritanau raiders, but a wise leader forbade them, as with those eagle charioteers and their warriors arrayed on the only high ground for miles around it would be suicide.

The wailing of their werrin could be heard from the town before these morose and thwarted warriors even cleared the trees. Their dour mood was soured further as they returned to Tref Borthmyn, and with the time now to look around them properly, they began to appreciate the destruction those raiders had wrought on this town and in so short a time. It had been done so quickly, their organisation and their military training were obvious, as these lanes were littered now with the bodies of young and old alike. Their blood ran down the gutters in long and greasy red rivulets just as the flags on their fortress' tallest tower were being lowered, and the shock was beginning to show on all the stunned people in these violated streets. The neighbouring Coritanau were ever efficient at war as all these people knew and all their ancestors could confirm, but there was no denying that they had been caught out by the recent years of peace between these neighbouring nations. Brythons rarely make the same mistake twice however, and so, some profoundly serious heads

were brought together in discussion in the largest of the town's taverns. All they could do now was encumber their embattled king even further with reports of this outrageous undertaking, along with precisely who it was that had carried it out and who commissioned the ill deed. As there would be a heavy price to pay at some point, Caswallawn would need to know where and to whom he would send the bill, in whatever form their king chose to send it. In the meantime, these people would stoke their hearth fires and their inextinguishable anger with equal industry. They would stoically await their opportunity to avenge their family members who had fallen this dark day, an opportunity which would surely come. The whetstones were brought out, and these determined Casufel werrin began to prepare for that eminently probable event in earnest.



Chapter Thirteen.

News had reached Caswallawn that he had been ludicrously blamed for the assassination of King Bellnor in Breged. This insult was made far worse by the fact that he and his gŵyrd were so committed against Caesar, it was madness to propose that even his thoughts would have ventured north at this dire period in the history of his besieged southern kingdoms. The fear voiced by his *bronze-shield* gŵyrd, was that the inexperienced and newly crowned king of the Bregantau may use this nonsense to invade northern Casufelawny in false protest. Caswallawn's agents had reported that *eagle* and *viper* troops had together been instrumental in building the tensions along his northern border, and the politically motivated timing had infuriated him. Cartysman and Afyn's troops had crossed their border repeatedly and had boldly raided for cattle around DunBorthmyn, making Caswallawn's northern lords nervous at the most inopportune time. His beleaguered army was at this moment hastily retreating to the greatest estuary in all Prydein and to one of its largest fortresses, harried continually by Caesar's advance forces. The race really was on to get to the *mined* ford at LludsDun and to assemble his army on the eastern bank in opposition, a stiff challenge in itself, and he could do without this distraction from his restless northern neighbours. National outrage at Cartysman's behaviour was growing daily, especially if the dark rumours were true about the manner of his succession.

Caswallawn's gŵyrd were clamouring for him to act, but it would mean sending some of his decimated reserves north, and with the dissenting Belgic tribes not even showing up to this war, he was far too committed at Aber Tafwys to risk it. Breged would have to take care of itself, but if Lloegr and his Casufelawny were invaded whilst fighting a patriotic war against a foreign invader, the repercussions would shake Breged's very foundations regardless of its size. As his brother's messenger was riding

east toward him with the good news about the future security of his northern border, Caswallawn had already sent emissaries north in all haste to meet with King Iddel of the Cornafau Calon. These ambassadors were to make his plea; in that one of Iddel's wise diplomats should take that young and fatally ambitious, new king of Breganta to one side and point out to him that it is extremely dangerous and foolhardy to poke a dragon with a stick, and very rude to boot.

* * * * *

Caesar had pushed his men hard, but they were used to it, and it had taken them just four hours to find the great river Tamesa, eventually making camp at *prima diei hora* on its western bankside. He had ordered this stop and stand easy for the men so that he and his officers could survey this broad estuary and its swirling, rushing waters. Both banks of this wide river and all its marshy approaches including the surrounding forests seemed utterly deserted, and not a soul could be seen in any direction. Every man in this army knew that this deceptively pleasing sight was a complete fallacy, as although the whole area looked abandoned, they could feel the countless eyes upon them from the shadows of the trees all around them. A vast barricade made from wooden stakes and wicker panels had been thrown up along the far bankside, and this impressive defensive structure glowed yellow with its obvious newness. It stretched for almost a mile in each direction along the furthest bank of this great river, and it was as impressive as it was long. Two hundred yards upriver on this side lay the foundations of a sizeable timber bridge and one which had clearly spanned the river at that point. However, the footworn approach and the two huge mooring posts were all that remained as it had clearly been dismantled and removed quite recently. It had led over this river Tamesa to Trinovanta and to Lud's Dun at one time, visible now in the misty distance over this huge waterway and over that four-foot-high, new and temporary barricade. A big timber gatehouse had been set into that long and curving, more distant palisade. The full-height

fortress palisade emerging from either side of that monstrous gatehouse was much more substantial and far taller. It was built atop a stone wall which was at least four feet in height, and that colossal palisade vanished away into the trees to both sides. Two more colossal but denuded mooring posts stood on the furthest bank of this river behind that glaringly new fencing, and from where the continuation of the road from the missing bridge continued. From here, the Romans could see that it ran directly inland to a 'T' junction in a main road which swept past the huge entrance to that distant, endless looking palisade. These bold invaders eyed it with interest, looking forward to discovering what lay within the infamous stronghold of a supposed descendant of dragons. Caesar had a yearlong grievance in that man's regard to settle, and he too looked forward to breaching the huge gate in that palisade and hanging a valuable silver hand from his horse's neck. Just short of this absent bridge was what looked like an ancient fording point, and it had obviously been superseded by the great timber structure upriver. Since its removal however, the locals had obviously reverted to this earlier foot crossing. It looked to be the only safe point along the whole curving stretch of this river to cross on foot at low tide, and all these new arrivals could see that it was well-used. A wide swath of countless hoof prints emerged from the forest to the southwest, filled now with water and studding this muddy riverside approach with tiny but bright and twinkling puddles. This broad and churned up track swept north from the distant treeline, lost some of its form through these marshy wetlands, entered the turbulent water of this muddy ford and abruptly vanished. This huge and unmistakeable cattle trail was testament to the large herds which had already been driven across from here safely and when the tide was out. The tide was obviously retreating, but as the water level was still high, this river Tamesa looked impossible to cross for the time being. A handful of mounted equites approached this obvious ford, and with barely a glance volunteered to swim their horses across as these cattle tracks had given them an acute sense of security. However, it looked a little obvious to Caesar and so he ordered them to stand down. On closer inspection of this muddy stretch of

bank a little later, it became clear to Caesar and his engineers that a great deal of defensive preparation had been carried out by the Pritans here at low tide. A lot had been done to disguise this fact too, which became clearer as the water slowly ebbed away. Bone-white points of a forest of sharpened stakes sunk into this riverbed were just discernible now amid the green fronds in the depths of this rushing grey turbulence, and so Caesar sent cautious swimmers secured with ropes into this river to investigate, and what they found gave him pause for thought. A vast lattice of sharpened stakes, foot foulds and mantraps had been laid down over the mud at the bottom of this ford and pinned down within the weeds and the bushes. His men discovered that this interwoven and deadly structure had been laced with long and sharp, jagged strips which had looked like serrated ribbons of scrap metal. From his divers' reports, these had been made from narrow lengths of bronze and brass, mostly thin framework, steel bands from old and rotten wheel knaves, and even old cutlery and bits of strap iron had been sharpened and included; whatever was available to their enemy and whatever could hold a biting edge. These thin but razor-sharp metal strips had been wrapped around clusters of steel blades or fire hardened wooden spear points, all anchored firmly to the roots of the bushes which held them and concealed them, from hardy sedges to tough crowfoots and reeds. Their knives and points had all been cruelly barbed, and these horrors thrust out from their camouflaged traps in all directions, making this deceptive ford an altogether impassable death trap. The Pritanic king Cassivellaunus was clearly no fool and had set this trap to catch out a reckless pursuer; the fake cattle tracks proving a very clever false trail, and one leading only to serious injury and a horrific death. The timing of their arrival however had played into Caesar's hands, as they had been forced to wait for the tide to turn and had been granted the time to inspect this crossing properly. Had the water level been just a foot or so lower, his cavalry may well have charged across without pause and it would have been an unmitigated disaster. Ordering his men into the water before the traps were lifted out would be suicide too, and so it was clear nothing could be done until the

water level dropped. So, the general called for a stand easy and allowed his men to brew up their *posca*. As countless fires were quickly lit on patches of high ground and from long practice, a messenger on a fast horse was despatched to the camp on the red moor with orders to bring up the engineers along with the little surprise Caesar had in store for these Prittans. Unseen yet and held in its pen aboard its own customised ship which had been moored deep in the heart of the fleet at their fortress, his 'not so little' surprise had been moved to the red moor fortlet overnight and would be the perfect solution to this fearsome set of obstacles. The legionaries settled down to the grass in their formations gratefully under this weak morning sunshine, and they sat around on these knolls in groups to await their refreshment. They were in fine spirits, and as their fires firmed and their pots of water began to boil, they sat looking eagerly across at Trinovanta, sorting out their lead gaming pieces and chewing a little *buccellatum* as they considered what lay ahead of them yet this day. Resting and refreshing themselves, they looked out for their enemy who were of course nowhere to be seen, but they all knew they were watching from somewhere, they always were.

The Prittans appeared among the trees across the water a little after midday, and their numbers continued to build as the Romans continued to rest and to wait. Even as they emerged from the distant forest to set up an opposing force on the barricaded far bank, these Romans remained sanguine and just played their games and drank their *posca*, watching closely as their enemy assembled roughly fifty yards short of the opposing bank. Ignoring the indecipherable insults and the raw challenges those barbarians shouted at them from across this broad river, these legionaries laughed back at them from their comfortable seats on this lush grass. The Romans blithely continued with their games and their amusements as *they* knew what was coming.

The water fell dramatically as the tide retreated, and this lethally festooned ford was finally revealed in the glutinous mud in all its stark and terrible detail. It was as deadly as it was complex, around thirty feet in

width and clearly spanning this river from bank to bank; a distance of almost two hundred yards. Many hundreds of metal blades had been fastened to the woven latticework of jagged and twisted metal ribbons stretching the whole width of this river, and these had been bolstered by many more hundreds of sharpened white staves. The black, fire hardened tips of these pale root-sticks and the disparate clusters of metal knives among them emerged infinitely slowly from the weeds as the water level fell, looking like a rising army from the Underworld, and the tip of each one glinted wetly and malevolently now in the afternoon sun. Following a stunned silence in which all these soldiers perceived the measure of doom from which their general had surely saved them, their relief and their gratitude turned to feelings of vicious and vengeful hatred toward their enemy on the far bank. Up to their chests and bobbing under the surface to work, his anger motivated men attempted to clear as much as possible of this deadly obstruction from the ford by hand and as it was revealed by the lowering water. Still tethered to a comrade on land to remain on station in this wild river, these men would take a huge breath before upending again to use their daggers and their axes to cut the wires fixing this structure to the roots of the clinging weeds below. It was dangerous work, and many received cuts and slashes from these razor-sharp ribbons and their clusters of blades, as once loose they were dangerous, waving about in this swirling water and catching anything soft in their hooked barbs. These men persevered however despite these lethal conditions, and these dour legionaries used long iron rods to lever up the nearest stakes once freed, and before others dragged these lattice panels away with paired horses and long chains with hooks. However, they had only advanced a dozen paces or less, and the main bulk of this ferocious obstacle remained awash and pinned to the mud of the central channel ahead and was effectively immovable to them, and so Caesar told them to stand down again and to continue to wait.

It was 'hors sexta' when the engineering immunes appeared from the south, and they were leading the very means of removing the remaining mat of fearsome stakes and blades from the mud of this crossing point. It

bellowed loudly as it broke those trees, making Caesar smile like a wolf. Even from this distance, the shock on those barbarians' faces over the water was recompense enough for all the effort and the gold it had taken to get this beast here. The Prittans were clearly transfixed and terrified beyond measure by his little surprise, and they began rushing about on that far bank wailing and pulling at their hair in consternation.

The *elephantus* raised its enormous, serpent like trunk and trumpeted its outrage with another deafening blast as it lumbered into the clearing. It began to splash heavily through these marshes toward the Roman camp, and their cheering was loud and savage in welcome. The animal was at least twenty feet in height, made to look far more daunting by the square and timber, castle-like structure affixed to its great back. Four men clung to this precarious and swaying fort, brandishing their bows and slings from each corner, and they lustily joined in the cheering. Incredibly, one diminutive man with coal-black skin and yellow bandages wound around his head sat on the beast's neck in front of that wildly swaying saddle fort, and this man was clearly the *elephantus*' master and controller. All this tiny little foreign man possessed to control this moving mountain of armoured flesh under him was a small wooden baton, but it was clearly sufficient as the beast followed the little man's instructions obediently. Sat behind a wood and leather saddle mounted shield of his own, he was in full control of this unique animal of war. At the flick of his cane and a shouted word the elephant bellowed again in furious challenge, its vibrating blast carrying clear across the water, terrifying those Prittans even more and who were clearly beside themselves now in their fear driven panic. Two impossibly enormous, curving tusks sprang from each cheek of this staggeringly huge animal, each at least twenty times the size of the biggest boar tusk ever seen in Prydein. This animal's monstrous and bulging frame was weighed down with thick armour plates, and it punched huge holes into this marshy ground with its feet as it lumbered across it. Its vast ears were like the billowing sails of a trading ship as it splashed heavily through these marshes with its huge, shield like pads and its tree trunk legs, making the boggy ground under it

tremble. The upswept tips of its long trunks which scoured the wet ground before it had both been studded with sharp iron nails, completing its fearsome aspect. Coupled to its enormous strength and the crushing weight of its armour, this alien beast possessed the most fearsome weapon over and above its unbelievable size and its armed tusks, one made of fear. The fear driven panic over the water was abating however as a few big and furious leaders could be seen roaring at their men and women now, cajoling their warriors back into their places, and slowly but surely some kind of order was restored by their enemy behind that vast stretch of wicker walling. Rows of archers could be seen assembling behind those long lines of round shields, only the tops of which showed over that woven bastion. Within moments clouds of arrows blackened the sky from behind them, and after so much waiting, today's battle had finally begun. To a series of loud wooden *thumps*, more than a thousand tall, rectangular scutum crashed together in the front ranks, a fraction before the first volley of arrows fell into them like a hailstorm of sharp, iron-tipped rods. Most were blocked by Roman leather and timber, but inevitably a horrifying number found gaps, and the screaming too began this day. As the tide ebbed fully, the lowest rushing channel in the estuarine mud of the Tamesa was finally revealed, as was the full length of the trap awaiting them, but the little Indian master of the elephantus knew his business. He steered that great animal directly toward the obstruction and gave the beast its orders, where to another great trumpeting bellow which carried clear across the river again, the elephant entered the ford and began to tear up the latticework with its huge, iron-spiked tusks and its powerful trunk in tandem. The engineer immunes were furious around this animal's great feet with long iron rods, levering and pulling at the stakes as the elephant raised the wooden lattice binding them all with its great strength. As each section was lifted from the sucking mud, the immunes would wade in and attach their long chains so that their comrades on land could drag it out with the horses, but it was dangerous work. Many fell from the Prittanic onslaught of arrows and slingstones from the far bank or were crushed by the feet of this great

bellowing beast they laboured around, and they were left screaming, pinned to Tamesa's glutinous mud and to Cassivellaunus' deadly trap. As this elephant and the frantic engineers around it forged across, and the convoluted mess of tangled stakes and razor-sharp ribbons was dragged away in sections behind them, the Pritans despite their obvious fear of this monstrous and never before seen animal bravely rushed forwards to defend their river. The arrows and slingstones continued to fly into the Romans as they struggled in this sticky and torturous mud to clear this obstruction and to lay down cut bushes and branches behind them for their following men. In this ponderous and perilous way, the elephant and the more heavily armoured immunes crossed the most dangerous, lowest point of this river and began to clamber over the weed strewn rocks of its furthest foreshore to approach the far bank, but all around them soldiers were falling to the stinking mud and to the remaining blades of the Pritans' deadly trap almost continually. The roaring centurions poured their best men after them, filling the gaps and pushing their legionaries into this thick and slippery filth, and it looked absolutely chaotic. Inexorably, their dour stubbornness and their training paid off and they eventually approached the far bank, but under the most withering fire every clinging and sucking, slippery step of the way. It was only the absolute best and the most obdurate soldiers of each Legio which could withstand this fearsome onslaught. It was only they who had the experience and the sheer bloody mindedness to forge ahead through it whatever the circumstances. Caesar's valiant vanguard fulfilled this obligation unflinchingly today, and they inspired the ranks of men scrambling down the bank behind them. Behind the rock-strewn and muddy foreshore that they all crawled and fought toward, the furthest bank of this river had also been festooned with long and sharpened stakes by the enemy, these set deeply into the bankside wall below the wicker wall. These were trained downwards toward the river, making it virtually impossible for men or horses to simply clamber up from the slick, barnacle encrusted rocks and the slippery mud of that riverside shoreline. Behind them, and protected by that forest of sharp white and downward angled

sticks was the clearly recently built, long, timber and wicker bastion, and it had been built atop that bankside at least four feet in height above it. Behind this stout, defensive fencing was assembled a host of Prittanic foot soldiers with their rows of tall spears and polished helmets catching the eye over the top. This stout barricade was long and undulating, following the contours of that furthest riverbank, and it was easily half a mile long in either direction. Hundreds of colourful chariots charged about the marshy ground behind it in support of their soldiery, but their archers and slingers however accurate could not stop or even slow the progress of this elephantus, nor the scutum covered and heavily armoured pioneers dragging themselves along in its perilous wake.

With a word from its little master, the elephant trumpeted loudly again and strode up to the bank without any hesitation, and as the massive armour plates over its shoulders and flanks were in the perfect position and the ideal height to deal with those wooden stakes, it was unperturbed by them. These were brushed aside like kindling by this towering beast, and this enraged elephantus with its iron studded tusks then smashed apart the bankside defences above it with ease. Then it swept a dozen or more enemy warriors from its sundered remains into the river with its trunk, including three mounted warriors and their screaming horses. Their screams were loud but short, as this armoured monstrosity took great pleasure in stomping them all to death in this foul mud, including the floundering horses. The castle mounted bowmen were furious with their weapons from the swaying back of this wildly cavorting beast, but they were exposed by their lofty positions and were soon picked off by enemy contemporaries, who proved more adept at the deadly art on solid ground. These Roman archers tumbled out of their precarious stations one after the other, studded with Prittanic arrows, but one unfortunate was snagged on part of the great saddle mount and never made a splash. With several arrows sticking out of him, he was suspended upside down on the elephant's flank by his clothing, and he swung like a pendulum with each giant step of this enraged animal. His wounds were not immediately fatal, and his screams were terrible as he bounced and swung violently upside

down from the great saddle. As the elephant smashed against the bank again to swipe more of the sharpened and maddening stakes away, the man's screams were curtailed in an instant as he was horribly smeared against them. The Prittans above that far bank bravely attacked again and again in waves, hurling their spears at the beast whilst others threw rocks and slung stones at it, but they were ineffective, bouncing off its amazing armour in the main and to no effect whatsoever. At its master's instruction, this armoured elephant moved along the river, tight to the bank and it scattered their enemy. A raw lump of bleeding and swinging meat was suspended from its right side now and which was awash with a great upturned fan of blood, mixing with the crusting black filth of this estuary on the leathery flanks of this incredible animal. It was clear the elephant hardly felt these volleys of missiles bouncing off its armour and its tough looking flesh, as it had been goaded into a killing rage by its little master and it was now virtually unstoppable. A long stretch of the enemy bank had been cleared and the long bastion above it reduced to splinters by this mindless monstrosity, allowing the heroic Roman vanguard to begin clambering up and out of this deadly river and its muddy bank. As their elephant went berserk upriver, attacking any enemy it found and smashing their defences to pieces, many Prittanic warriors were flung high into the air by the immeasurable strength of the enraged beast. Then it would rush forwards at a terrifying speed for such a mountainous creature and it would stamp on its victims, crushing them to broken and bloody messes under his huge feet with an obvious relish. It would deliberately press some of its victims down into the thick mud with one gigantic foot, and where they would vanish with barely a gurgle, and the beast would then round on the next group of enemies with equal savagery. The Prittans fell back from it, having no answer to its immense stature, its monstrous power and its unbelievable ferocity, and as it clearly loved to do battle, it was no surprise that they ran from it. Now the ford had been cleared, the main body of the legions started forward to the sound of a buccinator's horn, but the cavalry went first, their horses having to struggle above their fetlocks in the clinging mud of the rushing central

channel. The following legionaries fared much worse in this deep and sucking filth however and which reeked of its ancient decay as they pushed through it, and they were soon coated with this black and stinking mud. In pairs, battle brother had to work with battle brother to pull each sandaled foot from the thick and cloying sludge which stank of old death, and in this way, they fought on. On top of this, they were being constantly pelted with slingstones or pierced by Prittanic arrows, and men fell with each foot of progress gained across this murderous ford. Caesar was determined to cross however, and he sent more and more of his best soldiers into the morass with a large detachment of auxiliary archers and slingers in support, who stopped just short of the central channel. There, they swept the far bank with their merciless shot as their cavalry comrades hauled themselves up from the mud and onto solid ground, dragging their filthy horses up onto the rocky foreshore with them by the reins. It was clear that the way across the Tamesa and to Trinovanta was open now to Rome, and Caesar's wolfish smile returned. Unobserved by Caesar or his officers, a group of their soldiers had been pushed further downriver by the fast current and had clambered onto a small islet braving the swiftly rushing waters in this wider and deeper channel. They had unwittingly left themselves open to attack from the Prittans however, who had spotted them. Men were sent to kill them, and these Prittans splashed out into the water and looked to surround this small island.

The handful of soaking wet Roman soldiers who had managed to clamber onto this little island were fortunate to be in the company of a centurion of note and a primus pilli from the glorious 10th Legion. They were however mere auxiliaries and were no comparison to Centurion Marcus Scaeva; their de-facto leader in this situation. As the big man drew his gladius with a warlike roar, he was dismayed to see these Roman soldiers around him flee. Deserting him, they all dived into the river to escape the encroaching Prittans, who outnumbered them and would surely have surrounded them. These grinning barbarian tribesmen were now eagerly clambering up onto the grassy top of this little rocky islet to face this abandoned centurion who was now entirely alone, and Marcus exploded with an indignant fury.

Marcus had often shared with the members of his close family; the other centurions in this assembled army the events of the day that he had found the legion, or perhaps it was when the legion had found him. He had been inspired by the dazzling, God-like recruitment centurion who those years ago had stood so proudly before the SPQR drumhead set up in the market square of his Umbrian village. It had drawn such a crowd of the young men of his district that day, it had become difficult for Marcus to draw near to it. He was as patient as an oyster though, for as a boy he had cared for his sick mother for many years before she had passed to the next world, and it was there that he had learned to take control of the powerful inner man. At odds with his often-prickly demeanour, Marcus had learned to exercise a great and very tender patience at times during the care of his mother and it had formed a permanent part of his complicated personality. Once the crowd had died away somewhat that hot summer's day so long ago and in a different life, Marcus had gathered up enough courage to push his way through the gang of local boys to approach that fantastic armoured and glimmering warrior. He was as ready as he had ever been for anything in all his short and painful life, and he had taken his fate in both hands that day and had stepped up to that dazzling warrior. That tall and terrifying centurion had suddenly become a mortal man when he had smiled at him and asked him a few pertinent details about his age and what skills he had as if Marcus was just another normal person. The centurion had not even noticed the rags he was dressed in let alone mention them, and almost immediately the young man had been baited, hook line and sinker. That deeply impressive centurion had drawn him aside, perhaps seeing past the poverty, the harsh features and the wounded eyes to perceive something deep within him; a quality that Marcus perhaps had not known himself existed at that life changing moment. At the end of that brief recruitment summary of army life, that unforgettable centurion had advised him gravely; 'If you don't stand for something lad, you'll fall for anything', and Marcus had taken the pledge to join as a *probatio* in the following heartbeat. Many years of blood, sweat and toil had ensued, elongated by lengthy periods of boredom,

these peppered with bouts of incredibly hard work and short periods of dire peril. These were often punctuated by even shorter periods of rest and recuperation, commonly enjoyed between extensive and exhausting marches. Marcus had more than endured all of this, he had come to flourish within the strict tenets and protocols of army life. Several times in his career he had proved the recruitment officer's acuity that day, as he had not only risen to the same rank in remarkable time, but he had also come to surpass that inspirational man's achievements before he was half his age. It was his martial excellence and his attention to detail which had got him noticed and promoted quickly, but what had elevated Marcus faster than all his contemporaries was his unbelievable ferocity in battle. It had been in the battle of Dyrrhachium where he had ultimately proved his worth, and Marcus had there discovered the pitiless and unmatched warrior who had lain inside him so long undiscovered. On this remarkable day, he was the most decorated Roman soldier currently in service and he would demonstrate why to these uncivilised barbarians, those who dared to recklessly surround him on this inundated rock. Scaeva had earned his position in the hot, bloody crucible of frontline Roman battle time and time again, and without a moment's hesitation he charged these emerging Pritans. Marcus set about them with an uncontrollable fury and astonishing levels of deadly expertise, slaughtering them as they climbed up to fight him. A dozen or more grisly spearmen arose from the water all around him, but Scaeva was past caring, as he was beside himself with rage at the auxiliaries' cowardice. It demeaned him, his position and this whole army, even Rome herself, and this centurion became incandescent in his outrage. Shouting his oath to Mars, he was determined to seek out those deserters and bring them to his withering justice, but first he had to deal with these barbarian amateurs. The first Prittan was on his knees, streaming water from his ragged woollen clothing and clambering to his feet when he looked up, and that is when Marcus took his bearded head. His anger was temporarily suppressed by the cold, detached and professional soldier of such thoughtless prowess he had become, and Marcus heard the head of this first victim splash into the river as he swept

aside the spear of the next and slew him with a simple thrust to the throat. A flimsy wooden spear bounced off his right shoulder plate with a *clank*, coming from behind him, and it zoomed off into the river. Spinning around, Marcus sneered at the Prittan who had launched the weapon at him and who was now following up his attack with a reckless charge; his long sword raised. This tattooed barbarian ran onto the tip of Marcus' sword as he ducked under the long, *whooshing* blade of his enemy, and then he thrust upwards firmly with his gladius, cleaving the man's heart and killing him instantly. Ripping free his sword, Marcus roared 'Mars!' once more and charged the next group of tribesmen approaching. Splashed with the bright gore of his outclassed and wide-eyed enemy, this magnificent screaming denizen cleared this little islet of enemy attackers, slaughtering without mercy those who did not flee his wrath, and with each kill he roared out the name of his God of war. Once this blood spattered but still infuriated centurion had secured the ground and had killed all who dared oppose him, he dived into the river himself and went in implacable search of those auxiliaries who had abandoned him, as he was now in a fine killing mood.

Upriver, the cavalry swept the eastern riverbank, continuing the work of their elephantus and their auxiliaries, attacking the beleaguered defenders behind their shattered timber defences and those taking cover behind the bushes all along the northeastern bank. The elite *equites* braved the arrows and slingstones to do this, and to give their soldiery the time to haul themselves out of the stinking, grasping mud of this river to emerge like black ghouls to claim their newly won ground. These smelly, filthy and soaking men formed a defensive strong point around a part of the sundered remains of their enemy's own barricade, establishing this hard-won crossing point for the rest of Caesar's army, which was still braving the cold and deadly black filth behind them. Even though most of that terrible obstacle had been dragged away, the ford was yet proving treacherous underfoot, as with sudden screams or gasps of agony, the remnants of Cassivellaunus' deadly trap still brought many a Roman down to this stinking, riverine mud which yet concealed its cruel teeth. The

incensed Prittans threw their chariots at the quickly growing and now marauding cavalry in front of Lud's Dun with a wild abandon, and these mounted clashes were loud and furious. They followed a familiar procedure, the Prittanic charioteers circling his cavalymen in an attempt to isolate them into smaller groups so that they could destroy them before they could be reinforced, whilst other vehicles attacked those horsemen still emerging, but the cavalry had learned. His equites had been read the riot act by Caesar himself and so they stayed in tight formation, supporting each other to repel the clattering and banging assault of these swooping Prittanic vehicles, whilst their nearby formations of slingers hurled their 'buzzing', lozenge-shaped slingstones into the vehicle's occupants as they rushed past. The elephant seemed to be bristling with uncountable arrows and almost as many spears now, but the vast majority had peppered his armour plates and saddlery without injury to the beast beneath. Even those which had found its grey and thick, leathery flesh in the gaps between had not hampered this great beast one bit. They seemed only to have maddened it further, and its little eyes blazed red now with its rage filled bloodlust. It managed to climb ponderously from the river and made an ear shattering bellow when it stood on firm ground once more, throwing its long trunk high into the air. The swinging lump of bloody meat at its side finally fell away with a splash, and the elephant raised its massive and terrifying, blood smeared tusks then in another boisterous challenge, standing mountainous on its hind legs in Trinobanta for the first time. It gained its front feet once more with a thumping splash, and it suddenly lumbered toward the milling conflagration of enemy horses and vehicles, now hemmed in and corralled by their own wicker bastion. The elephant's empty castle swayed madly from side to side as it charged, splashing across this marshy ground and making an ear-splitting racket. A valiant phalanx of those busy chariots detached themselves from their swirling host and recklessly headed directly for this barrelling, bristling elephant. Their brave, rear standing warriors launched a volley of spears at the beast but only one found flesh, the rest just bounced off its impressive armour. That one well-thrown spear pierced the

animal through a gap in its chest plates, but it had no visible effect whatsoever on the elephant, apart from driving it into an even worse rage. Bellowing like some unholy creature from the Underworld, the elephant turned on his quick and deceptive attackers, and his master knew exactly what to do. With a word in one colossal and flapping ear, the elephant raised its bony head and brought his iron nailed tusks down with an enormous crash onto the nearest passing chariot, smashing it into splinters, and both men riding it were crushed to a red pulp. As this trumpeting leviathan rounded on the other chariots milling around it, smashing another two vehicles into splinters with a huge side-swipe of its massive and heavy tusks, the reckless Prittans once again withdrew from its insurmountable ferocity and its power. As the Roman cavalry, the elephant and the increasingly triumphant legionaries ran amok along the northeastern and newly claimed bank of the Tamesa, the Prittanic chariots disengaged completely. In clouds of spray, they retreated from these marshes, bumping over the fringes and vanishing back into the trees, and in that moment, the Prittans' great defence of their sacred river estuary was lost. The enemy's retreat was covered as usual by the excellence of their archers from the trees, and these men even managed to bring down Caesar's expensive war elephant with their accuracy. They had realised it was pointless raining arrows down on the beast indefinitely as its armour plates withstood almost everything, but with intelligence and obvious organisation they targeted the animal's huge treelike legs, and eventually it fell screaming and bellowing, its thick limbs inundated with fletched arrows. Rolling onto its side with a huge and roaring blast, the beast showed its soft underbelly, and in moments it was festooned. Pierced by uncountable arrows, the elephant coughed up blood and breathed its last huge breath, leaving the crushed body of its long-travelled master trapped under its massive head.

Caesar was satisfied, and he surveyed these great gates in the endless palisade before him now with a fierce anticipation. Despite his losses, including the elephantus which had cost him so much in gold, time and effort to bring here, he was content as the beast had served its purpose,

and now all Trinovanta lay open and at his feet. First, he had this Lud's Dun to vanquish, and he relaxed now in his saddle as he watched his heavily armoured breech force go to work once more with their axes and their prybars, surprisingly to no opposition from those deserted battlements. When the gates were eventually smashed open and his men charged in, they found themselves inside an immense outer palisade encircling a small town, and this tightly fitted row of tall and sharpened trunks which surrounded it all vanished into curves among the distant trees for seemingly miles. An interior, smaller but similarly palisaded fortress commanded one of the two hills to the northeast, but the gates to this inner central keep surrounded by this vast enclosure were thrown wide open. Nothing moved, as this immense fortress and the new looking town within its outer walls along with the inner, stone-built stronghold at its hilltop heart had all been completely abandoned. As Caesar's army passed through the outer gates and moved through this town's eerily empty streets, they discovered that everything of any value had been stripped from every single property, and even the interior fortress was nothing but a shell. Unseen from outside, massive eastern gates from this citadel led to a harbour inlet to this great river and these too were wide open. The harbour buildings, the long, thatched workshops and warehouses all along that approach road were nothing but empty structures, and not a thing stirred. Not even a bird could be seen or heard in the trees dotted about this deserted town, its harbour or from the surrounding forest outside this unending palisade, and a supernatural silence had descended on this corner of Trinovanta. These Romans left the place quickly, the men fearing this stronghold's malevolent *dragon* spirit which still hung over the whole abandoned fortress like a heavy cloak, but they fired it anyway on leaving. The flames reached high into the sky above the Tamesa, spewing a vast column of black smoke into the air behind them as they moved northeast off these marshes. It would be seen for miles around, letting Trinovanta know that their kingdom was now as wide open as the gates of a burning Lud's Dun, and that time was finally running out for its embattled subjects. Caesar made camp on some

high ground downriver but still within sight of the bridge remains and the ford, which was now being swiftly concealed once more by the rising and clearly tidal waters of this great river. A burning Lud's Dun was also clearly visible from this viewpoint, and as he evaluated his progress over a decent camp meal, it became clear to Caesar that many of the tribal armies he had faced the previous year had not shown up for this subsequent war. It seems that this Cassivellaunus holds little authority or power over the other kingdoms in this backward and bewildering country, especially those hardy northern tribes and their monstrous Gadwyre. Not even those vainglorious but entirely problematic Cambric families who had so nearly cornered him last year had the nerve to face him again this time, and Caesar was glad of it, thankful that disunity was not just a Roman sickness. As the centurions called out the start of the *tertia vigilia* watch and the pickets were employed to the perimeter, the nearby fortress was merely a smoking ruin. An eerie silence had descended on this huge Roman encampment, and it was made more profound by the pandemonium which had proceeded it.

The fires were lit, the goatskin tents erected, and Caesar and his legions rested in Trinovanta for the first time. Considering the repeated losses of the Pritans, most here were sure that this invasion war was all but over, and it would soon be the time for the sackcloth and ashes of their enemy's total surrender.



Chapter Fourteen.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have gathered here today and under the security of my banners so that we may discuss the problem of our young Bregantan king in privacy and in safety.” General Cadallan grumbled, and his huge and deeply dimpled chin jutted its usual lantern challenge into the smoky gloom of CaerEbor’s ancient great hall. Despite his fearsome visage and his notorious reputation, the swell of noise from the representatives of the three tribes here present drowned out his next words, and so the infamously impatient general bit his tongue and glowered at the rows of raucous warriors before him. This excitement, felt by all here was in some part due to their infamous guest sitting to the general’s right and whose priceless silver hand graced the top table today, and it glinted dangerously now in the dancing firelight.

Dark rumours of regicide and patricide had swept their federation, and Cartysman’s sudden ascension to the throne of Breganta was under some very close scrutiny here tonight, and by some very powerful people. The events surrounding the great King Bellnor’s death and claims of outside agencies were dubious at best, but if worst was proved and the dark rumours were found to have foundation, Bellnor’s death had been utterly horrific and undeniably treasonous. Cadallan’s Carfetau had been incandescent with rage at the possibility of Cartysman murdering his father for the throne of Breganta, even as it was not an uncommon thing in Prydein’s history, but it was his assumption of the leadership of the federation of all Breged which had stirred the rest of northern Breged into protest. Gŵyr Baglo *Creuol*; the unflinching master of Queen Morgu’s guard had left this caer months ago to take up a vaunted position at DunRheadr and at his elevated, now *royal* daughter’s side in Breganta. Very recently, all Cartysman’s agents and spies had been expelled from Paurisa on the queen’s orders, and battle lines it seems have been drawn.

Cadallan had gathered these leaders here at Queen Morgu's Paurisan capital under his own banners of the *leaping-deer* and the monstrous if not outdated pendragon flag, as no one would be foolish enough to challenge their unimpeachable authority. A notorious black and star-spangled banner shared the battlements of CaerEbor this day and for the first time alongside Morgu and Cadallan's pennants of glory. Its fame and its legend were as familiar to all Brythons as the flaming war hammer emblazoned across it, as was the golden crown and the infamous druid's symbol below that. The people of north and eastern Breged had flocked to this most ancient of caers this day, drawn compulsively to these high flags of destiny flapping madly on its battlements, and especially the infamous black Khumric one. The Lupocarau had come down the coast from their northeastern corner, tight to the border with Albion's Selgofa and Fotadina. Under his banner of the *stalking-wolf*, King Tarwyn ap Tybiau had marched his *wolfpack* gŵyrd south to this hurried assembly, making a triad with Queen Morgu's *bronze-swords* and Cadallan's *leaping-deer* warriors of the Carfetau. General Cadallan understood these people's complaints and their concerns, as Cartysman had ridden roughshod over their boundaries and their farmsteads for years and had treated them like lowly vassals all his privileged life. That arrogant miscreant was not a high king and would never be if Cadallan got his way. He knew that the apprehension which gripped all Breged now was that the *rheolwr y grym* of this whole federation was in doubt. Bellnor had earned that 'ruling power' by his diligent and constant efforts to sustain this vast conglomeration of disparate tribes over many years, cajoling them ceaselessly into one coherent alliance. His son had earned nothing more than hatred, fear and resentment over those same years, and in Cadallan's withering opinion, Cartysman would never possess a fraction of the statesmanship required to achieve and to maintain such a challenging and mercurial thing. Having possession of the fabulous *llath y gallu gwyn* meant nothing without having earned the title of high king by mortal combat in an official throne challenge, the short list of royal combatants being ratified by the tribal and druidic councils beforehand, and this

procedure was as old as these hills around CaerEbor. Cartysman had ignored this procedure of such inestimable age, and had taken possession of the silver, dragon capped and beautifully sculpted rod of white ash from the king's private chambers the day Bellnor died, and had then just assumed power, much as he assumed that he was going to get away with it. Unknown to that reckless young monarch his profane act had disturbed some very ancient spirits, and it had sparked a frantic religious upheaval among the priesthood of the mother country. Forever facing away from each other, these solid silver dragons were identical apart from the eyes. One silver dragon had white diamonds for eyes whilst the other had bright red rubies, and the white rod of ash they encapsulated was riven with an ancient, Etruscan style of coelbren lettering. This stunning, spirit wreathed creation was thought to be ancient war plunder from the middle east and subsequently brought here by the fierce Trojans; those global elites who had arrived here almost half a millennia ago. This was following a civil war in Prydein, sparked by a calamitous epidemic which had torn through the country killing royal, noble and werrin alike with no distinction or mercy. This plague like sickness had crawled south from Hebridea like a curse from the old gods, and nothing the druids, druidens or meddygs tried had stopped its terrifying, inexorable march south. The skies above a reeling, grieving Prydein became smoke filled from the many thousands of funeral pyres as that calamity had rolled south without pause or let. Only one in three had survived, and many royals and political leaders had perished in that ancient countrywide outbreak. The country had then descended into a nightmarish power grabbing vacuum, before the smoke had even cleared. The country's leading arch-druid at that time, one Abaris was sent to Greece to make sacrifice at the main temple to Apollo there to counter the terrible auguries of Hebridea, but he had also been tasked to bring Prince Brutus of Troy back to Prydein with him. The hugely impressive grandson of the great Aneas was deemed the only man with enough power and influence to end the civil war here by this nation's druidry. Brutus was considered by them to be the only man with the unimpeachable lineage and the martial experience to control the warring

factions of this beleaguered country and to bring some sort of order to the carnage left over from that terrible, internecine war. And so Abaris had tracked Brutus down following his flight from a beleaguered Troy, with a magical arrow if the bards are to be believed, but however he achieved it, following an impassioned and heartfelt plea from Prydein's brif-druid, the noble and powerful Brutus had agreed to journey here to the 'summer isles' once more, but this time to end the extremely damaging war which had been destroying this country, arriving from Lemnos with his entourage and his amazing army in a fleet of huge warships. Brutus not only brought control to this fractured country, but he also ended the internecine fighting which had been raging for years. Brutus also established a new and much welcomed rule, but he also carried with him many developments and improvements in all manner of things, from weapons to art and almost everything in between. More vitally, that great man had brought with him a fabulous, dragon capped rod of power his awesome grandfather had won in battle, and that priceless artifact had come to symbolise the Khumry's legitimacy and their authority across these isles. Moreover, those Mesopotamian dragons encapsulating Breged's white rod of power had come to symbolise the fighting Khumry themselves, and it is why Khumry is known as the mother country and why she is so respected and adored, especially the seat of her religion and her most revered and sacred isle; beloved Môn. Many generations ago, this spectacular and priceless artefact had come into the possession of the Bregantau and by equally bloody means. What those honoured Bregantan ancestors would not have known perhaps was that their reckless progeny would come to abuse it in such a dreadful way. The venerated druids of Khumry had declared that the abuse of Brutus' prehistoric 'dragon rod' had caused a nightmarish disturbance in the Underworld. The powerful priesthood of all Khumry were galvanised by this foreseen calamity, one which threatened their very existence if their Uati were to be believed. Young King Cartysman of Breganta was unaware of most of this, and despite his position in life and the education available to him, the history of these lands clearly held no interest to that over-

indulged royal. Neither did he know that the sons of Beli Mawr themselves were leading the secret planning for the resolution of his heinous act, and it would be Lludd and his powerful brother Llefelys who would spearhead a violent and decisive solution to Breged's spiritual problems should Cartysman not come to his senses. Llefelys held a similar position to Lludd, in that he was the *benadwr* of the Galliad priests' soldiery, and his patrons would be equally invested in the prevention of this potential spiritual calamity in the Prydeinig midlands should Cartysman seal his doom in that way. That shallow and deeply flawed young Bregantan monarch was everything General Cadallan and all his Carfetan people hated in *royalty*, and the general was not about to let that psychotic juvenile ruin all that he, Bellnor and all these tribal leaders had achieved over recent years across these territories. Cadallan had sworn to himself that he would remove the white dragon rod of power from Cartysman's hands himself if he had to, dead or alive and with or without his greedy little fingers.

"Enough please!" Cadallan roared over the din, and it had its desired effect as some kind of order was soon restored in CaerEbor. So, with a deep breath to calm himself, the general continued from this dais at the head one of Prydein's oldest great halls. "You know Cartysman approached me for assistance at Coritana's southern border with Casufelawny, trying to feed me some horseshit about Afyn being worried about Caswallawn raiding north into his territory. As if King Caswallawn hasn't enough on his plate at the moment!" Glancing at his guest alongside him, Cadallan shook his head at his own words. There was a rumbling of agreement in this hall and from all these likeminded warriors at those same wise words. "Yes, it's ludicrous we all know, but we all too know of King Afyn's greed and his desire for power, and so it becomes clear; Cartysman and Afyn have allied to invade northern Casufelawny when at its most vulnerable!" He paused here, pleased that he had everyone's attention. Many were cursing loudly at this declared confirmation of Cartysman's stupidity, most feeling the same way about him, that he was a deeply spoiled individual who had over many years and

as a young crown prince made uncountable enemies across these lands. “My agents report that *eagle* and *viper* warriors have continually crossed into northern Casufelawny, killing the Casufel werrin of DunBorthmyn and stealing their cattle, and it had to stop. They have tried hard to provide this spark of conflict themselves and for their own ambitions. But know this good Prydeinig!” Cadallan glowered at them all, and they were hanging on each word now. “I sent two catrawd of my *leaping-deer* warriors down to the border over a week ago, and Iddel has sent an equal number of his valiant warriors of the *war-horn* to join them, so there will be no further incursions south from Coritana!” He stated bluntly, glowering at the rows of faces before him. All here were sane and of sound mind, and so there was no challenge to this terse announcement, just a tense and apprehensive silence, but it lasted only a heartbeat. The following roar of approval was loud suddenly, smashing the uncertainty aside with the Brythons’ indefatigable and unassailable spirit, making the beer logs crash to the tabletops once more in joyous accord. Cadallan stood with a pink neck at this raucous celebration, but knowing these people well, he gave them their head for long moments before attempting to continue. They knew him well too, and as his huge lantern jaw lifted they fell silent, and the *drip, drip* from the enclosing ditch outside was profound in the expectant silence.

“My royal guest needs no introduction, nor does his authority and influence need any confirmation!” Cadallan growled into the silent vacuum which awaited his words. He grinned at the wide-eyed and silent audience before him, continuing with a twinkle in his eyes as all the other eyes in this great hall were on the noble guest alongside him at that moment. “So, King Lludd ap Beli Mawr will accompany me tomorrow, and as soon as we arrive in Coritana we will make our demands very clear. They *must* give us a sworn oath and a *secured* undertaking; in that they will desist from any further cross-border hostilities into his brother’s lands. Once we have our important hostage, my men and Iddel’s will continue to ensure those demands are met. A fairly standard procedure really.” He told them this casually, but the crowd responded again and began to bang

the tables with their beer logs in the age-old salutation. Cadallan just stared at them expressionless, allowing their exuberance as he may have a great need of it in the days to come. He took a long draught of the excellent mead as the clamour subsided, and smacking his lips, he pressed on with his usual confidence. "As I have just informed you, I sent messengers to King Iddel of the Cornafau Calon and he sent troops to join my men at the southern border, but I have also sent communication to King Caswallawn, advising him to fortify his northern boundaries if he can, but we are all aware of his courageous defence against Caesar currently on the southern coast. I know there is this absurd 'northern exclusion' to consider, so we cannot defy our priests and sojourn south. However, we gave our oaths in the previous war, and as it is entirely patriotic, we shall have to support Caswallawn in his defence of his borders with Breged and against our rash combrogi, as we certainly don't want to anger the sons of Beli Mawr." He added lugubriously, nodding to Lludd again with a grin. There were some profoundly serious nods of approbation from the crowded benches at this, and from the more senior leaders present. The crashing of beer logs returned with a vengeance, but this time the suds and the ale were spilled to the honour of the visiting and hugely respected Khumric high king, and he looked moderately pleased but aloof from his place of honour on the dais. Cadallan allowed them this time once more for their celebrations and called the stewards over, signalling a short break. Once the top table had been served with their desired refreshments, Cadallan resumed the discussion they had begun at Lludd's capital in southern Khumry on his previous visit to that glorious bastion. Tactfully broaching the subject again of his brother's infamous defence of Prydain against Caesar, the general was pleased that his guest was once again receptive, leaning in to talk quietly amid the bedlam in Morgu's hall.

"I hear things continue to go badly for your brother Lord Lludd, but being away from my caer I am ignorant of the latest news." He said this quietly, staring straight ahead and taking a loud slurp of his mead. His eyes sparkled in the smoky gloom as his companion turned to answer him.

"Yes, Cadallan sadly. He was forced into that defensive battle in front of my dun at Aber Tafwys, and which then proved so decisive. Caswallawn suffered such severe losses there, he was obliged to withdraw completely and must now be forced into an impotent stalking war with that Roman bastard." The forlorn tone in Lludd's admission was telling, but Cadallan said nothing. "That rogue had an armoured *pachyderm* brought from Gallia with him you know, and he had it rushed up from his encampment on Rhôs y Rhôsyn. That enormous and unassailable beast destroyed Caswallawn's defences, and it scattered his brave men and women with the utmost ease. I have found it difficult to believe all the lurid details of its proportions and its fearsome aspect however unimpeachable the sources!" Lludd informed Cadallan with a frown and a questioning look, silently anticipating his guest's next question.

"A pachyderm? What on this green earth is a *pachyderm* Lord Lludd?" Cadallan asked him with a surprised expression.

"A colossal, mountainous and monstrous animal Cadallan, brought from some far distant country known as the *Indus* I think it's called, but it was a most awe and fear inspiring beast which the Romans called their *elephantus*. It was more than twenty feet in height by all accounts and propelled by two huge sails attached to its head, and from where a monstrous great serpent sprang from the middle of its face!" Lludd grinned at Cadallan's shocked expression but ploughed on remorselessly. "This great serpent coiling from its face was almost twenty feet long and it was tightly flanked by two enormous and curving tusks Cadallan, each the size of a small tree. It was trained to use that huge snake and those massive tusks together as weapons, and both tusks were festooned with long iron spikes!" Lludd told his guest this with equally wide eyes, swallowing noisily.

Both these men shook their heads at these lurid descriptions of Caesar's great beast of war, news of which was travelling this land faster than any storm could. As alien and as preposterous as these reports sounded their sources were beyond reproach, and so these two incredulous men were

forced to accept as true these unbelievable details, and yet neither could conjure such an impossible animal in their imaginations. Neither were able to gain even a vague idea of what Caswallawn had faced in Trinobanta that day, and it made these manic reports sound even more otherworldly to their disbelieving ears.

“Our fortifications in and around my abandoned dun, and the mining of the only fording place with iron spikes and *foot foulds* amounted to naught with that leviathan tearing up everything in its path, so I’m not surprised the troops ran from it. Most of my brother’s remaining indentured soldiers and spearmen were killed or injured in that desperate riverside action, and as the werrin warriors; the farmers, the smiths and the builders have all since gone home, he only has his lords and ladies in their vehicles to call upon. He has precious little left to him now Cadallan, sadly!” Lludd added morosely, taking another big and noisy slurp of the fresh beer.

Cadallan nodded sympathetically but said no more, as there was nothing more to say about Caswallawn’s catastrophic failures on the southern coast. So, he stood up to address this familiar and crowded hall once more, giving his guest a short bow. This packed hall fell silent almost immediately.

“Lord Lludd is here on the most serious issue of the *rheolwr y grym* of all Breged and the leadership of this federation, as if Cartysman refuses to return the white rod of power to the druids and refuses holy orders, you all know the consequences and who will be applying those consequences!” He addressed this crowd in a loud voice, and everyone’s gaze was back on Lludd Llaw Ereint at that moment, but only momentarily as this infamous king stared back at them boldly. This most dangerous of men was, as always, supremely confident in his own unassailable authority and abilities, and he infamously ignored no challenge from anyone. All these midland people, the powerful and their followers lowered their eyes respectfully, none of them forgetting for one moment that this man was the son and heir to Prydein’s greatest ever warrior and so much more. Cadallan broke this respectful hush then and in his usual brusque manner.

“All of Breged may be laid waste by the fire of the druids should Breganta allow their murderous little king to break sacred orders, and our federation will be left in ruins from his treachery. So, ladies and gentlemen, it is imperative that we keep the problems of Breged to ourselves for the time being. Whilst Gabrantofica and Seganta are both subdued by Cartysman and Afyn to where they are of little use to us, together I am sure our three Houses along with Iddel’s Host of the *war-horn* can apply enough pressure to change the mind of that idiot *before* our druids declare the nacâd!” Cadallan spat the last word out, and there was much groaning in the crowd at this dire event, as the ‘refusal’, once officially called by Breged’s druids could not be rescinded. These people knew as all Prydeinig people knew, that the *cychwyn* would soon follow in response and by holy orders from the all-powerful priests of Khumry, and once that all feared and terrifying ‘rise’ was announced, the *llath y gallu gwyn* will be returned to the priesthood of Prydein through unstoppable force. All their lands may be scorched in this fraught event however, and so these people had gathered to mitigate that inconceivable conclusion. The general seemed satisfied at least, as it was clear he had the complete accord of these two neighbouring tribes, and as a protesting northern triad, he would take their complaints south along with his own and his honoured guest’s, starting tomorrow. Once the druids got themselves organised and petitioned Cartysman properly, he will no doubt come to his senses and give up that spiritually charged and ancient rod of power and end the cataclysm in the Underworld foreseen by Khumry’s venerable priesthood. However, if, in his juvenile delinquency he refuses the druids and even baulks at the threat Cadallan poses, this man alongside him with his gleaming silver prosthetic will undoubtedly lead nine thousands of his unstoppable *Black* Essyllwyr on a holy mission into Breganta to retrieve it. They will move under their black, sacred banners and behind their round black shields into the heart of Breged like an avalanche of death, and they will, one way or another relieve Cartysman of the white rod. The Gods alone will be able to help any or all forces put in their way then, as on holy orders the Essyllwyr become the *Black Essyllwyr*; an utterly wild and

predatory host, being virtually impossible to disengage and totally hell-bent on slaughter once released. From past and life changing personal experience, Cadallan had seen for himself, that splashed with the hot gore of their enemy the 'Black' Essyllwyr are at their savage happiest as killing is what they live to do.

This great debating council, suitably chastened by possible future events was convened as all now knew what was required of them. Until Cartysman makes his move, all their efforts have to be focussed on mitigating the repercussions to the fatal error that young Bregantan king was making, and these two vaunted, celebrated men were determined to play their part.

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Reeling from his insupportable losses on Rhôs y Rhôsyn, Aber Medwas and especially after his punishing stand on the narrowing aber of the Tafwys, Caswallawn was forced to refuse any further pitched battles. The enemy's cavalry and that unholy creature had laid waste to his valiant reserves, destroyed his defences, and had allowed that yellow dog to take possession of LludsDun. Whilst his brother's fortress was an abandoned shell when the Roman entered it, now it was destroyed, the whole estuary region was under Caesar's control. Having taken the telling decision to disband the greater part of his werrin army, Caswallawn knew that this had been seen as capitulation by many of his nobles, but it was clear that he had no choice. It was felt the same way by all his gŵyr too and the assembled aristocracy who made up the little over two and a half thousand charioteers left to him, as he had all but declared his own defeat. Now left powerless to face Caesar in any kind of battle formation, his earlier decisions came back to haunt him and to put a big dent in the morale of his surviving elites. The one force capable of such a feat was an excluded and absolved holy triad, and he had closed that particular avenue of reinforcement with dire insult, permanently to many a concerned critic. Caswallawn at this point was no doubt glad that his controversial exclusion had not crossed the border into the mother

country, as it was Khumric archers who had so far saved so many lives with their rearguard excellence, and it was they, who, with their great yew war bows and their astonishing accuracy had brought down that apparently indestructible and tusked war beast. Being armoured at all its vital points that towering animal had seemed invincible, but with clever targeting of the monsters huge, shieldlike feet and its treelike legs, that murderous *elephantus* had been brought down by Caswallawn's countrymen and slaughtered. Although he had virtually given up hope of taking on the legions in another direct confrontation, Caswallawn was resolute in waging this *guerrilla* style war against the emboldened Caesar, one which he had practiced with these brave men and women throughout the winter months. Using his tactical *knouse* and the four disparate *alau* of charioteers who had survived thus far to curb him, he was determined to give the yellow dog nothing. However, in view of this perceived Brythonic powerlessness, the Romans had advanced into southern Casufelawny and had laid waste to it with virtual impunity, plundering and burning as they went and sparing no one, earning Caesar's unflinching troops a terrible reputation. Caswallawn made no attempt to interfere with the main columns of infantry as those invaders left his lands and marched boldly into Trinobanta, eating their own cavalry's dust. He was content to watch their line of march and attempt to calculate in which direction they were heading each day. More importantly, he would try to guess at when they would arrive at each of the preidentified locations and ambush points along their chosen routes across Afarwy's lost lands. Caswallawn would remain a short way ahead of the rising cloud of dust, but always observing from the dense undergrowth at the treeline or from a nearby hilltop. Once Caesar's route was confirmed each morning, charioteers would speed ahead, driving the werrin and their livestock from their trefs and treflans into the woods and the hills, and they would do this for miles along either side of the Roman's anticipated marching route. Caesar was wise to this however, and he would change direction abruptly, maddeningly marching away from a well-set ambush and into uncleared territory. Much of the destruction and the merciless slaughter these Romans had been able to

carry out on the villages and small communities dotted about this panic-stricken territory had been carried out in this manner. Caesar's Gallic horsemen had been the vanguard on each occasion, whose speed and mobility allowed them to range far and wide once they broke from a deceptively established route. Most crucially, they could fall on a village or a small town in these still populated pastures before any meaningful alarm could be raised and their defences organised, and so the werrin of Trinobanta were rudely introduced to the murder hungry *milwr* of Rome unannounced, and the land ran red with their honest and ancient blood.

If ever any of the deeply hated Gallic cavalry units carelessly ventured too far into the open on foraging or reconnaissance duties, Caswallawn would send his best charioteers out of the woods from familiar lanes and pathways to intercept them, and to deliver swift and deadly attacks on them. Brigades of Khumric archers protected his camp, and companies of these highly capable men and women were set in ambush at the woodland fringes along the Romans' route each day, ferried to each location by his charioteers. If they were lucky and they caught the Romans before their main change in direction, as the enemy cavalry rode past them they would sweep them with volleys of arrows, which would come searing out of the trees, falling almost perpendicularly into their ranks such was the distance, picking off their riders at the flanks and causing chaos in their formations. The Romans would respond of course, and so Caswallawn's vehicles were tasked to collect the then threatened archers and to sweep them off to their next location. The rest of Caswallawn's aristocratic and highly mobile charioteers would gleefully return the savage ferocity of their enemy on these roads and pastures with a cold vengeance of their own. No mercy was shown to the slow or the unfortunate among these stubborn invaders. By these constant, unpredictable, and unannounced ambuscades and whipcrack chariot assaults, Caswallawn began to see the results of his good use of these war vehicles and Khumry's incredible bowmen. Caesar was compelled to keep his hated and hotly pursued cavalry in much closer array to his slow moving, hungry and exhausted legionaries, and this was regarded as a

small victory by the Brythons. Being a pivotal part of Caesar's army and his overall strategy, Caswallawn targeted his mounted elites and those Gallic cavalries with more focus, so they suffered heavily in the ambushes, waylays and well laid traps he ordered set each day. Necessarily highly mobile and able to move to a new location in moments, these attacks were carried out again and again by the elusive and flamboyant charioteers of his own southern Brythons and by the visiting, equally colourful brigades of volunteer Khumric archers. Ferried around by cart and chariot, these stout men with their thick tattooed arms and their barrel chests, all grinned wickedly below their drooping moustaches as they waited patiently in ambush somewhere among the trees of this beleaguered kingdom. The Casufel king's doggedness began to pay off, as the Roman general was forced to keep his cavalry within range of swift infantry support, and so Caesar's plans for all-out and free ranging conquest were put on hold and thrown into doubt. It became glaringly obvious to observers and political commentators alike among the Prydeinig aristocracy and its imperious priesthood that Caswallawn's remaining forces were ably anticipating Caesar's routes despite their decimation at his hands. It was undeniable that the Trinobantan land the Roman dog discovered anew each day all looked the same; abandoned, denuded of any value and burned to the ground. Despite the punishing losses Caswallawn had so far suffered in all three losing battles to the Roman, he had prevailed. Regardless of the dissolution of his werrin army and other restrictions Caesar had forced upon him militarily, by his canny use of these contentious but shocking hit-and-run tactics, the king of the Southern Brythons was holding his own and had forced nothing short of a stalemate on Caesar. This courageous monarch had shown Caesar that whilst he could not end his rude trespass and oust his army of invasion, Caesar could neither destroy him. Thus, he could never claim any *ruling* power over this denuded land he had occupied so harshly and so expensively. Being denied the full superiority of his *equites* in open ground and with them no longer able to range far and wide to carry out their unannounced and devastating attacks, Caesar now found himself in

clouds of dust and hemmed in by them. Amid the morale and energy sapping, morass slow weeks that followed, Caesar came to realise that he was pointlessly plodding through a hostile country like a starving, dust covered dog chasing its own tail, and with nobody left to fight.

In the smoke-filled vacuum which now gripped southern Trinobanta, its elusive monarch finally came out of hiding. Doing this ostensibly to prevent further loss to his people, Afarwy's motives were no secret. It was perhaps his murderous relationship with Caswallawn; Caesar's enemy in this second attempt at conquest which drove him to make this final gambit, and none who witnessed his treachery were at all surprised. Led by one infamous King Commios, Afarwy and six of his most loyal gŵyrd broke cover and approached the Roman lines through the smoke of the rear. They came to request a parlay with the general and were swiftly ushered into his presence.



Chapter Sixteen.

In the smoke wreathed and beery atmosphere of Galan's great hall and with the grisly Gŵyrd y Gogledd in attendance, news of Caswallawn's defensive failures and the decimation of his army far to the south is being heard here at DunAdda with mixed feelings. What he is now trying to achieve in the southern states of Lloegr with guerrilla tactics, misdirection, subterfuge and falsehood are being passionately discussed here in the high north. These animated discussions were held amid several games of *bones* taking place on the tables around the dais of this high vaulted and ancient great hall. A grim looking senior *penaig* was reciting the latest reports of the Roman war from memory and from one corner of this raised dais, but only a few were really listening. This seasoned lieutenant sported several facial scars among the swirling blue tattoos and looked entirely ferocious, pressing on with the report from the head of this long and thatched hall regardless of the patent disinterest shown by large parts of the audience. The battle at the *mined* ford across Linn Tafwys near LludsDun was retold by this tall and well-built leader of Galan's agents, and the part that decisive battle had played in the war was retold in much gory detail. When this impressive warrior went on to describe some monstrous creation of unholy nightmare, all here would have denied the news as false had they not known the originating messenger personally and by reputation. Caswallawn's bravery in the face of the Roman enemy and that alien monstrosity was lauded, but all here knew that Caesar had effectively broken the back of his southern army and is now rampaging through Trinobanta without pause. All the southern Brythonic king can do now is watch the Roman general from the wings and attack his loose troops and his foraging parties with his vehicles as the war around him becomes one of dire and murderous attrition. Laughably, due to Caswallawn's own vainglory and his obscene ambitions, no one it seems

in all Lloegr has the power now to expel the yellow dog once and for all. There are also dark rumours of treachery and treason about the elusive King Afarwy in this dour report, revealing that the once well-respected noble who had suffered so much at the hands of Caswallawn may have allied with Commios; Caswallawn's oldest and most unflinching enemy. He was reported to have done the unthinkable, no doubt in revenge and in a last-ditch attempt to regain his beleaguered kingdom. Knowledge of Commios' singular, all-consuming obsession with Caswallawn is country wide, and his vociferous hatred of Casufelawny had become a thing of ridicule and rude invective to all Prydein's bards. It was no surprise to any of these northern men that Commios, who had spent the last twelve months as the lackey of Caesar was involved in Afarwy's treachery. It was commonly remarked in these northern territories that if Julius Caesar ever stopped suddenly, Commios would get Roman shit on his nose. That exiled king of the Atrebatau was as despised in these parts as he was derided, and for good reason. However, Galan and all these seasoned, senior gŵyrd around him remained sanguine at this news from the far southern coast, as their interest in that war had vanished at the infamous *exclusion*. These northern warriors felt more removed from their southern cousins now than they ever had in the past. The more pragmatic among these men and women knew that the Roman would soon return to Gallia when he'd had his fill, and if he left all southern Prydein in flames when he departed, it was neither here-nor-there to these proud and *disqualified* Galedonian warriors. Besides, they had more pressing matters to hand; the running of a large and powerful federation. The bards and the musicians arrived then, and a great cheer went up, drowning out the rest of this burly penaig's report. As the huge silver cauldron was brought through the door by two big stewards, it steamed with its sweet contents, and the cheering got louder. These thirsty northern warriors started banging their drinking logs on the tables in appreciation and in anticipation as it was the time for warm *medd-melys* and singing, and they had waited for this all evening. The big and gruesome looking officer ended her interrupted intelligence report with a sanguine expression and

shrugged her muscular shoulders, stepping down from the dais. She thoughtlessly joined the queue for the mead horns, just as the rattle of metal dipped knuckle bones resumed behind her at the front tables.

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As Cartysman and Afyn had been compelled by powerful forces to put their plans to invade and to conquer northern Casufelawny on hold, in an attempt to consolidate his position in Breganta, Cartysman turned his avarice inwards. Cementing his controversial relationship with King Afyn of Coritana, together they looked to their tribes' glorious pasts and plotted to overthrow the Paurisa and the Lupocarau eventually, adding to Gabrantofica and Seganta as completely subsumed states. If together they could bring this about in the usual, age-old and violent way, they would gain unchallengeable overall power of the whole midland federation. Between them, they would then control all south and central Breged to both the east and the west coasts. The Cornafau Calon in their southwestern corner would be completely isolated from their allies in the far northwestern territories of Cadallan's Carfetau, making their alliance all but impossible in practical terms and forcing them both to agree terms. Should Cartysman and Afyn succeed in this highly perilous joint venture, they would subdue the whole vast region of Breged to their new and dubious joint rule regardless of their priesthood's protestations. At least that was their plan, but they were completely ignorant of the cataclysmic upheaval their *new power* would unleash across the Underworld, as their possession and their subsequent illegal use of the 'dragon rod' was perceived as the utmost profanity by this country's most powerful priesthood. Too young perhaps to be rightfully terrified by the threat posed by the *Aer y Derwydd*, and unaware too of the dire consequences to his actions and to the spiritual health of all Prydein, Cartysman and Afyn continued to whip up their troops and to foment this uprising. Ignorant of the ominous response coming from the mother country's all-powerful druidry, which was imminent, these two vainglorious monarchs recklessly ploughed onwards with their plans of overall rule over Breged's six ancient tribes.

King Afyn's Coritanau were a deeply creative and magical tribe in their ancient past, known as the *Coraniaidd*, and known too as a neighbourly and much respected people, but wildly ferocious if crossed. Their modern counterparts and Afyn's near predecessors became infamous however as more ruthless rulers acceded to the *viper* throne, eventually subduing all the other tribes around them with extreme violence and becoming in time the fierce Coritanau. Afyn's equally vainglorious father King Folsion had carried this tradition to new heights, subduing the ruling southern tribe of the Corieltaufi with a shocking level of violent persecution, rare even in Prydein. That ancient, midland House had evolved into a peace loving and pastoral community of artisans in the south of Breged, and who had been wise and generous governors too when they had risen to power through popularity. That golden period which had come to define the aristocratic Corieltaufi had seen an explosion in the glorious arts in all its myriad forms, and the bards still sing of this inspirational, highly creative period in their history. Afyn's father; the late King Folsion had ended that inspired era, and by waging a merciless war on the Corieltaufi. It was nothing short of a shameless and rapacious grab at ruling power and all their fabulous wealth, killing their soldiery and their werrin with withering cruelty before scattering their surviving aristocracy, and as a result, the Corieltaufi had virtually faded into history. Persecuted to the very cliff edge of extinction by Folsion and then by his equally tyrannical son Afyn, the Corieltaufi intelligentsia had distanced themselves from all other tribes, eventually resettling quietly in an isolated corner of this huge territory in the utmost secrecy. Those wise and secluded old nobles of the ancient Corieltaufi were sought out now and by two very outwardly dissimilar, but two stubbornly likeminded gentlemen of no small repute.

Cadallan and Lludd travelled anonymously across southern Breged seeking out these old and valued friends, being a very ancient royal bloodline who had deep and abiding roots in this wild, central territory. Although well-hidden and highly secretive, these two stellar men were like the bloodhounds of LugDdu himself and were soon on their trail. They managed to find them and to form a congress with those almost-

forgotten, isolated leaders of the southern Corieltaufi. Shown the utmost respect and hospitality, Lludd and Cadallan were allowed to speak to their leaders and to their tribal elders around a somewhat meagre banquet, but one they had been most grateful for. Together, they convinced these noble fugitives that their cause was just and that the time had come for the Corieltaufi to reclaim their lost glory. With more assistance than they had ever thought possible both physical and spiritual, and with the dire events now in play across this vast central region, it was time to recover their stolen lands and their misappropriated wealth in the combined opinions of these two stellar men, but more importantly, their honour. Within a fortnight, these two infamous aristocrats had reassembled the kings and the princes of these scattered families for the first time in three or four generations. They came together at King Iddel's CaerUricorn, and Iddel, Cadallan and Lludd persuaded them to reestablish their ancient Corieltaufi, who had been so cruelly subdued by the Coritana centuries ago and when the *rheolwr y grym* had been wrested from their long dead predecessors' hands. When the highly respected King Alaric ap Guto agreed to lead them, the other leaders showed their courage and stepped forward to approve the alliance. So, the swords were drawn and great men took a knee. There and then in Iddel's spectacular royal temple to Cornonnyn, the sacred, triadic blood oaths were solemnly sworn by those grisly old nobles and their sword masters. Professional messengers were despatched for the long haul west to Khumry ahead of a delegation of priests, and another pair of *cennadwr marchog* was sent across the channel to Armorica and to Llefelys' great citadel, all bearing the very latest news and intelligences.

Llefelys' CaerGwened is located on the western coast of the great headland of Aremorica. It sits above *Bae yr Môr Fychan* and at the mouths of two very dissimilar rivers known as the Mawr and the Fychan for obvious reasons, and which finally and fatally ally before finding the ocean at that beautiful bay. Porth Gwened lays inside the great sweeping limb of Penrhyn Rhÿs; the long and rocky promontory which curves like a protective arm around the harbour to the west of it. Outside this safe

harbour stretches endlessly the *Ar y Môr Fras*; that vast and terrifying Atlantean Ocean, and King Llefelys ap Beli Mawr's fabulous, white bannered citadel overlooks it all. The Corieltaufi are a tribe dedicated to the God Cornonnyn and are too a 'people of the deer', and so King Llefelys felt it a personal duty that he helps reform this old alliance of the Corieltaufi. Together with his infamous brother and a notorious Carfetan general they would oppose that Godless and ruthless *snake* Afyn ap Follysion of the Coritanau, in honour of their shared worship of Prydein's most respected deity, the eternal horned one; Cornonnyn. If Cartysman of Breganta refuses the Druids' demands, Lludd and the *Aer y Derwydd* will deal with him, but if he gives up the rod and continues his warlike ambitions with Afyn and those two serpents are left to their own devices, all midland Prydein will pay a dreadful price in an all-out civil war. Only the werrin army; the *Corionototau* will be able to break that feared deadlock should the worst happen, but that noble body had not been summoned in more than two centuries, and so it was a forlorn hope at best. If Cadallan and Iddel fail to bring this new and feared alliance to open field battle, Cartysman's strongholds of CaerUswyr and DunRheadr will be fully manned and prepared for any assault or blockade. King Afyn's capital CaerLindon will also be locked down and secured, as will CaerBwrdd and all his other minor strongholds. All these caers will then be put under the inevitable, interminable, territory wide siege, and the resulting bloodshed will be excruciatingly drawn out and immensely costly to all concerned. With the surrounding tribes galvanised and their borders already closed to Breganta, Cartysman had declared a state of emergency across his kingdom, ratcheting up the tensions and making travelling across the heart of Breged a dangerous undertaking. It was especially dangerous for two notable gŵyr of the Bregantau, both old friends, and who had both learned to become very stealthy in their movements of late. These two furtive lords with their heads on swivels stole over their southwestern border into the neighbouring lands of the people of the *war-horn*. Gŵyr Eidyn ap Bwlc and his bigger but equally nervous partner were ostensibly travelling to CaerUricorn to pay a bill for legal services received by the

court of Breged, but in reality they had a secret appointment with King Iddel ap Madoc himself to attend. This subterfuge would last about one heartbeat if Cartysman's troops caught them out in the open, and their nervousness had reached new heights until they had reached the security of the trees. They had been keeping extremely low profiles since *the event*, as being far from stupid they were both painfully aware that they simply knew too much. Their lives were now worth precious little, and while their young king was in the north fortifying his own DunRheadr for the civil war everyone now expected, these two had taken their chance and had slipped carefully away from the late Bellnor's capital CaerUswyr, heading south to the *people of the tactful heart* and on fast horses.

By late afternoon on the day of their furtive arrival at CaerUricorn they had told Iddel everything. Their part in an old Ecenic debacle over some stolen gold in which they had been inveigled by the canny Cartysman had been revealed, and it was this declared crime along with the threat to their lives which had allowed their king to blackmail them so effectively into doing what they did. They too confessed their part in the cover up of Bellnor's murder, implicating the newly crowned king, his avaricious and equally new wife and many of Cartysman's senior gŵyr. This angered King Iddel and his attendant gŵyrd immensely, who were all for immediate retribution. It had a sobering effect on an extremely dangerous looking guest too, one who had been sitting quietly in a corner enveloped in a long and black hooded cloak. This beautiful sable cloak had been thrown over superb and brightly polished mail of a quality only within the financial reach of the truly wealthy elite. Unexpectedly, this honoured guest had been present during the initial part of this briefing in Iddel's private stone-built lodges, but he had not said a word to either of them throughout. This 'briefing' soon turned into a long series of serious questions when this impressive gentleman eventually took an interest, and however friendly the delivery of these incisive inquiries, it was clear that this had become an interrogation. They held nothing back as Iddel's reputation was a stern one, but it could never match the *bri* nor the stellar reputé of his equally royal guest. That man's chiselled features and his notorious, glimmering

silver hand should be introduction enough for anyone who hadn't lived in a highland cave from birth. Before Gŵyr Eidyn and the muscular Gŵyr Cydwas *Llwyd* left CaerUricorn for a careful return to *new* duties, they had been restored in confidence and given a new perspective on their loyalties by this most elevated of personages. They had also been offered a new but perilous route back to honour and by joining this burgeoning rebellion these powerful men were forming. Both had accepted this new lease on life with alacrity, even as their new mission was a daunting one. Eidyn and Cydwas were far from shrinking violets, having attained their enviable positions the hard way, through determined hard work and courageous martial achievement. So, they had accepted this dangerous assignment with as much aplomb as they could muster given the terrifying company and the equally terrifying alternative.

Looking at each other wide-eyed in these huge royal stables and across their horses' rumps, it dawned on Eidyn and Cydwas that they had just survived an encounter with a dewin-king and the most feared and mysterious ruler in all five kingdoms. He was probably the finest swordsman in all Prydein too despite his impediment, but he was certainly the heir to great Beli Mawr who had most definitely been an Uthr Pendragon and was *Pencampwr Prydeinig*, and so that imperious man with the silver hand had filled their thoughts since the meeting had ended. Their sober faces gave a grave insight now to the profound impression he had made on them both as they strapped down their saddles without a word spoken between them. It was two different men who clattered down Iddel's chariot ramp minutes later, and it was noticeable in the way in which they sat in their saddles. Turning away from the road north and the way back to Breganta, they took a more easterly route toward CaerCorion and the location of their new mission in life. Eidyn and Cydwas had been given an opportunity to atone for their albeit *enforced* part in the appalling scandal of Bellnor's regicide, and they had taken the offer with open arms. They were buoyed by the fact that they both felt back on the *right* side in this quickly brewing conflagration now, and one which would consume all Breged if some vitally essential tasks were not carried out in

time, and they were to lead one of those crucial and all-important undertakings. The success of their mission was critical, playing a pivotal element in the overall planning of the rebellion, and the significance of this enterprise although terrifying had restored these men's pride too. All they had to do now was to meet one of Iddel's agents in southern Coritana and to hide out until the time arrives for *their* invaluable contribution. This alone would not be easy as Coritana was now too under martial law and crawling with troops, but getting there was child's play compared to what was to follow. Their involvement once they were in place and when the time comes will be to lead a raiding party *into* CaerCorion, where somehow they must gain legal and unassumed entry to that monstrous and primary bastion of their foe. Then, they must secret themselves in and across that busy and fully garrisoned enemy fortress with no alarm in some unfathomable way, and before then breaching its walls to allow the rebels in. Then they would all climb to the very top of its tallest and most guarded tower, again unseen and unheard. All this before the *real* examination even begins for these two men and that on the roof of Bran's mighty tower, and the prospect of this complex and dangerous mission terrified them both. That is where the deeply mysterious and truly ancient but newly and secretly repaired, stone-built structure of the *Horn of Bran* lies in waiting. There are incantations to make there, blood to be spilled and puzzles to solve before the Horn of Bran *Galed* is revealed and so that it is ready for operation. To enable this momentous undertaking, the remarkable Khumric high king Lludd had given these two re-emboldened men detailed instructions on how to unlock the Horn of Bran and how to make the ancient call to arms, whilst their comrades would fight all opposition to give them the time to complete this vital mission. Lludd Llaw Ereint himself had made them sit and repeat all the instructions over and over until he was satisfied that they had the procedure fixed in their minds, and only then did he release them. Theirs was a hugely important part in this planned and amazingly complicated uprising; a rebellion which included a fleet of warrior filled ships sailing across the southern channel

from Armorica to this endeavour, and all led by *that* man's infamous brother; King Llefelys ap Beli Mawr.

As this pair of Bregantan lords left Iddel's vast citadel and headed for the border, they were both stunned by the turn of events and the about face of their own destinies. The glorious countryside around them was unseen to these two distracted nobles of Breged as their thoughts were filled to bursting with what lay ahead of them, *who* it was and how many of their combrogi depended on their success, and of course the inconceivable repercussions of failure. They were still deep in thought when they crossed the border into Coritana which was alive with enemy troops, and they both suddenly woke up. Eidyn and Cydwas put away their concerns for the future as surviving right now took immediate precedence, and they both headed carefully for the trees with their heads down. Two hours of careful and quiet riding southeast brought them to the fringe of another dense forest by a well-known crossroads, and they took a break here to rest and to water the horses. Finding a pretty, lily-strewn stream meandering away into the myriad firs of this adjacent forest, they both slid gratefully from the saddles to let their horses' drink. Eidyn seemed agitated and would not settle, however. He squatted by his horse still holding onto the reins, but his gaze constantly flitted back across the scrubland they had just traversed and to the forest they had come from behind that.

"What is it Eidyn? What concerns you?" Cydwas asked him bluntly, handing him a piece of dried beef as his horse craned its neck to slurp at the stream alongside him. His comrade took the food but said nothing, his eyes narrowing as a flock of startled birds took to the air above the trees of that distant forest, and his eyes darted from one place to another at its edge.

"We're being followed." Eidyn grunted in response, stroking his horse's fetlock thoughtlessly as it noisily slaked its thirst, but his narrowed eyes never left that distant green fringe.

“What! Who by?” Cydwas breathed, looking past Eidyn and his horse, out over this stream and across the rocky ground from where they had come, trying to spot their pursuer, but nothing moved along that treeline, and he looked back at his friend with question.

“I can only guess at *who* Cydwas, but trust me my old friend, we are being hunted.” Eidyn growled as he stood up. “I have known for some time my combrogi. Come on, we have work to do!” He informed his grey-haired companion and gave a low whistle. His horse obediently backed away from the riverbank at his command, and Cydwas grabbed the reins of his own gelding, following Eidyn into the trees with a thoughtful look on his big face.

Finding an overgrown hollow in these trees, well-concealed by tall and dese undergrowth, Eidyn told Cydwas to secure the horses to a stout sapling at its heart, and then he took all that they would need from the panniers, including a large coil of sound hemp rope. Leaving their hidden horses cropping the sparse grass among the brambles, Eidyn then led them both up onto some higher ground overlooking the stream where they concealed themselves among the trees to wait and to watch. Before too long it became clear that they were indeed being pursued, and by three deadly hunters who were dressed in the all-black clothing of notorious legend. Even from this distance their tall, cross-strapped boots and their face windings of the same colour colluded to form an infamous image, and it revealed their identity to these two erudite lords in an instant.

“Lug’s arse! Viper assassins.” Cydwas growled, just as three deadly looking men cleared that distant forest’s edge and slunk into view. Like a trio of low and sinuous hunting dogs, they hugged the ground as they moved slowly across that open but fractured terrain in the distance. Those three black-clad, diminutive but chilling figures studied the ground before themselves assiduously before moving, each seeking out even the smallest patch of shadow or cover at every opportunity, making their halting progress difficult to follow.

“Ay Cydwas, *viper* cutthroats, and you know who sent them and what their business is with us here today, as we just know too much. They have come to kill us both!”

Cydwas frowned at his comrade’s dark words, and the big man watched those tiny but deadly assassins intensely as they flitted from one bit of brush to the next or vanished behind an outcrop of rock in the blink of an eye.

“In a kingdom where life has little or no value, it seems death still commands a fair price!” Cydwas spat out with a grimace, and his shrouded eyes flashed with a dangerous light as he looked at those three sinuous trackers in the distance and with his infamous anger beginning to surface.

Eidyn knew his big and muscular partner well, and he grinned at his insight and his building anger now, knowing they were going to need it in the coming hours. His eyes became shrewd as he turned back to watch the sinuous, visceral approach of those three professional killers himself. “I have heard Cydwas, that in an *urban* environment viper assassins are unsurpassed. But did I ever tell you that my tad was a famous trapper? In fact, the finest across all Breganta?” Eidyn asked him, not turning his head and with his glittering eyes still fixed to that trio of little black figures flitting its way inexorably toward them. Cydwas looked across at him with a hopeful expression.

“No Eidyn you didn’t, but I get the feeling that I’m about to learn a great deal about your very capable late father!” The big man gave his senior comrade a terse grin, and with a nod from Eidyn, they stole away to their own business. Eidyn then proceeded to educate his big friend in the most ancient and subtle art of leading men to their violent and bloody deaths.

The first trap he showed him how to assemble was a simple whip branch, which he carefully selected from a stout ash sapling and tied it back with a stripped-out length of string from the rope. Three sharpened stakes were quickly lashed to this sapling, which would be as compressed as one

of the Khumry's great war bows when set, and as simple as it was, it was just as dangerous. The sharp points of this trio of stubby lances tied firmly to this curving and trembling branch were set horizontally and at waist height when sprung. Lashed two fingers apart to the main branch, they had been set to puncture the lower abdomen and the stomach of the trap's victim. It would render the man useless and consign whoever was careless enough to trigger it to a long, lingering and agonising death. Upright now in the *shot* position, the heavily notched and barbed tips of these sharpened stakes would snag on the internal organs of their victim once released and driven home, preventing them from being withdrawn easily, being a cold-blooded addition by a very accomplished trapper. Eidyn amazed Cydwas further by demonstrating with a consummate ease and skill, just how to *set* this trap properly and to cover all sign of their labours. They reestablished a clean set of footprints then to Eidyn's strict instructions, leading carefully and clearly right through the trigger point. Once Eidyn was satisfied, he carefully set the trap's trigger, and they both moved on to the next location like two mercurial ghosts.

It took Eidyn several minutes to find the right set of trees and the big rock he needed, and he put this to one side before showing Cydwas how to set up the second trap. It was in part identical in principle to the first, in that its pent-up power came from another bent and compressed branch of a living tree but a much bigger one. As soon as he spotted the tree he wanted, Eidyn had quickly shinned up it and had secured two long lengths of rope to the topmost reaches of one of its main branches. This trap in comparison was a vertical one and without weapons, but it was a much larger and more powerful trap than the first. It required a thicker branch and one which needed the strength of both men to tame it to their desires. Quickly forming a carrying sling with part of the unravelled rope and throwing a big coil of the remainder over his shoulder, Eidyn climbed his neighbouring tree, whilst Cydwas climbed the one beyond their chosen trap tree with the end of his own rope. Together, with some clever levering and plenty of brute force they managed to haul the great high limb of this central tree downwards between them with the ropes, and

Eidyn quickly tied it off. He used a slip-knot to quickly tie this thick rope to a protruding loop of root at the base of the adjacent tree and he secured it, leaving it as taut as a bar and quivering with the imbued tension of its sudden and now deadly potential. Cydwas climbed down to the ground flexing his great shoulders, as Eidyn clambered back up to conceal a little surprise in his own tree before sliding down to rejoin his comrade on this forest's floor. Once down to the leaf littered ground again, Eidyn was quickly whittling a trigger from a branch and demonstrating the correct way to knot and to set this larger trap when a piercing scream shattered the silence of this forest.

"One down. Two to go!" Eidyn growled tonelessly, and the two men looked at each other with savage grins, as their first trap had obviously claimed a victim. It gave them more than a grim sense of satisfaction, as it confirmed their pursuers' location and informed them exactly how much time they had left. The man's powerful screaming drifted through this forest now however, setting their nerves on edge from the realisation of what they had done, and that man's agony stabbed at their consciences as they worked. Ignoring the spine-tingling moaning and the suffering man's agonised wailing, Eidyn quickly laid the noose at the correct point on the ground, keeping in mind what that fatally injured man was here to do, but more importantly, he had two deadly comrades somewhere. Placing a piece of solid gold from a broken brooch in the middle of the loop of rope carefully, Eidyn made sure it was almost covered and allowed just a *gleam* of buttery yellow to show as these men on their spoor were no fools. With infinite care, they both brushed away the evidence of their exertions once more, and then Eidyn reset a deceptive set of footprints through the heart of this trap with equal precision and care, and then they both drew together to one side of the now invisible danger zone to quietly discuss what was required next.

"They will come one at a time Cydwas, from *that* direction and very soon." Eidyn pointed in the direction of the awful groaning and sobbing of their victim. "You know what must be done. When the trap springs, you must

rush out from this bush and spear the man Cydwas! Make sure you run him through properly with one powerful thrust, and remember, leave the last man to me. Trust me Cydwas, I won't let you down." Eidyn told him softly, and Cydwas nodded back at him with his eyes glittering. Taking his place in this dense juniper bush below these trees and to one side of this clearing as instructed and clutching his spear tightly amid its branches, Cydwas watched as his learned companion and his oldest friend vanished without another sound.

Now he was alone, Cydwas' fears returned in a rush, as although the moaning of that dying man who was about a hundred *reeds* from his hide had almost faded to nothing, every few moments he would hear the man cough. Then the agonised groaning would start up again, and it was shredding his nerves and pricking at his conscience. Not being able to see anything from the dense heart of this juniper, he could not stop himself turning his head this way and that, straining to hear the slightest sound of an assassin's silent and deadly approach, but the forest around him had suddenly become as hushed as a druid's grove. Even the man's dying moans had abruptly stopped, and the ensuing silence was both ominous and profound, lifting the hair along both his forearms. A bird above him fluttered away in alarm and the ambience changed abruptly then, lurching from the harmony of a calm and sylvan peace into a tense and fraught atmosphere of impending doom. It caused the hair on Cydwas' nape to rise painfully in sympathy with that on his forearms, and his breathing became instantly laboured. Soft footsteps could be heard now on the leaf litter of this forest's floor, and Cydwas' heartbeat accelerated alarmingly, thudding painfully at his temples. He froze, not daring to breathe, and his wide eyes swivelled to the right just as a shadow passed this bush that he was hiding in. He could hardly see a thing through the tangle of branches with their tight little bunches of purple fruit, and so he stayed utterly still and silent, not daring to move even a muscle. Cydwas held his breath, and he could actually smell the animal odour of the man now as he slithered past he was so close.

The loud, rushing *twang* of the sprung trap caught him totally by surprise for some inane reason, and he was startled by it. Cydwas thrust his head through the intertwined fingers of these juniper twigs and he was amazed to see a black clad figure swept into the air with a shriek. Caught by one ankle, the noose had tightened in a flash and this assassin was shot upside down into the air by their trap, and so, Cydwas rushed out with his spear. As this mankiller fell back toward the earth, his trap although had him fast eased his rushing descent as the great branch above him compressed again, and the man threw his arms down instinctively to protect himself as the ground rushed up to meet him. Black gloved fingers just brushed the fallen leaves at the lowest point of this undulation, and in that blink of time a shard of gold fell from them. As the momentum began to swing the other way, but before he was propelled upwards once more, Cydwas moved quickly and charged out of his bush, scattering purple berries and broken twigs and screaming in his fear and his anger.

“Cornonnyn!” He yelled hoarsely, and he speared the man, right through his rib cage. He had to release his grip on the shaft quickly, as this screaming killer was swept up into the air again with his limbs flying wild. A wide-eyed Cydwas watched him fly up with his spear sticking out of him, but his hair suddenly stood on end again as he remembered that there was another killer afoot. The slightest sound behind him made him spin around, and then his mouth fell open. The last of King Afyn’s viper assassins had effectively crept up behind him without making a sound, and Cydwas was amazed and fearful in equal measure as he had no chance of drawing his own blade. This killer’s unique and deadly looking, hooked sword was poised and aimed at his throat, and Cydwas wondered where Eidyn was as he faced his own certain and imminent death.

“With King Afyn’s compliments Cydwas *Llwyd*, and when I find your skinny friend Eidyn, I’m going to gut him and I’m going to take *his* head too!” This gimlet-eyed assassin seethed from behind the black windings of his mask, and then he raised his hideous looking blade. As this assassin moved to strike out, Cydwas was even more amazed, as in the blink of an

eye the man's head was replaced with an enormous crunching *thump*, and by Eidyn's 'surprise'. This took the form of a heavy and triangular shaped piece of granite which Eidyn had dropped on him from his hide up in the tree, killing this assassin in an instant. This boulder which Eidyn had dragged up his tree with the rope sling had been dropped with an uncanny precision, the pointed end of the heavy, sharply triangular rock plunging between the man's collar bones and into his upper chest cavity in an explosion of breaking bones and splashing blood. It shattered his neck in a heartbeat, and the heavy stone snapped his head backwards and out of the way as it crashed heavily into his lungs and parted his ribs with a series of hair-raising wet *cracks*. The dead man's knees buckled from the abrupt addition of this colossal weight, and he toppled over backwards in a huge welter of bright crimson to land awkwardly, *rocking* momentarily on his almost severed head and spraying blood from his sundered neck and torso to these dead leaves.

"Woo-hoo! Bang on target!" Eidyn yelled from the top of his tree.

Cydwas fell to his knees, shaking his head in tempo with his trembling body, and it matched the drumming of this dead assassin's feet on the earth beside him. Cydwas looked at his shaking hands in disbelief before looking again at the terrible sight of that destroyed human being on the leaf litter next to him. His ashen face was splashed with the hot blood of that smashed and awful thing that was a man just seconds ago, and Cydwas was still trying to get his breath back when the body of the dangling assassin he had speared *thumped* to the ground next to him. Cydwas put his grey, blood-streaked head in both shaking hands and sat back on his heels, just as his smiling combrogi joined him on these red splashed leaves along with their two black clad but blood soaked and unmoving victims.

"Quite a shot eh Cydwas?"

"You could have bloody told me!" The grey haired, ashen faced Cydwas was on his knees still, grumbling into his hands.

“What?”

“You could have told me what you were about Eidyn! I nearly shit my bracs!” Cydwas informed him solemnly, lifting his head to meet Eidyn’s gaze, and his eyes amid the blood spatters were stark and still wide with the shock of his sudden salvation.

“Cnuch me Cydwas, try to keep up. I thought you knew what the rock was for. I thought it would just flatten him, but that’s hilarious!” Eidyn laughed at his victim, looking down at the mess he had made of him, but it was a dark laughter and one which never reached his shrouded and glittering eyes.

“No, I bloody well didn’t!” Cydwas countered quickly, still shaking his head. “I thought it was a counterweight or some other part of your nefarious trap. I didn’t think you were going to drop it on his bloody noggin, right in front of me!” Cydwas protested, dragging himself up from the ground and brushing himself down as Eidyn laughed at him. “What do we do with the bodies?” Cydwas asked his amused comrade with a grimace, wiping at the blood on his face with a sleeve and still staring at the incongruous and unworldly figure on the ground at his feet with the enormous and faceless, triangular granite head.

“Nothing Cydwas. I haven’t heard a peep from the first one we knobbed, so I think he has departed for the bridge of swords already, so no further heroics are required in his regard. We leave them all where they lay as fair warning Cydwas, to any and to all who may follow in their footsteps as I don’t think our evasion and our escape from Afyn and Cartysman’s clutches is yet complete. Anyway, as far as I can tell that was the last of the pig cnuchers for now, so we better crack on as we’ve lost a fair bit of time. What did stone head say to you anyway?” Eidyn asked him with a wry grin, spitting on the dead man before gathering their equipment and the long length of hemp rope, which he coiled up and threw to his frowning companion. “Here! You can carry this back to the horses Cydwas, I’m knackered!”

“He told me that they had been sent by King Afyn to execute us, so the game really is up Eidyn, and unless we pull this crazy bloody mission off we’ll both be finished in Breganta. Our lands, all our properties and every one of our cattle will be forfeit, and a price will be put on our heads!”

Cydwas growled as the ramifications of his own words struck home perhaps for the first time. Looking down, he kicked at the bloody leaves and the earth resentfully as he considered this catastrophe and the loss of everything that he had spent a lifetime building.

“My dear friend, all that has already happened.” Eidyn told him quietly and frankly, busying himself and not meeting his friend’s eyes, as he was bereft himself with the same cruel knowledge.

Cydwas just nodded in response, realising with a grim expression that it was just so, and that they no longer had any options left open to them and only one possible direction; onwards.



Chapter Seventeen.

In southern Breged, Cadallan was assisting the Corieltaufi nobility in its final preparations for this revolution he was forging, but they had one inviolate condition to uphold before the details could be finalised and the oaths taken. This caveat was made in support of a spiritual problem of unimaginable size and consequence to all Prydein. This was in response to the nation's druidry and to the orchestration of the senior priesthood of Khumry; in that Cadallan must raise the *Corionototau*. The sacred 'people's militia' are the perfect spiritual instrument to calm the motherland's fractious priesthood and the best singular justification for this alliance. In their opinions, the Corionototau were the ideal foil to end the cataclysmic upheaval in the Underworld and which had been created in Breged by Cartysman and Afyn's profanity and their *new* unholy power. This mythical battle between dragons; the red and the white commenced at recent Beltain, and which horrifying conflagration is tearing at the spiritual fabric of this country unseen and unheard by the werrin, but it has threatened the nation's spiritual wellbeing to a degree that it caused a great hue and cry among the senior priesthood of Khumry and all Prydein. The Corionototau were the Corieltaufi's reserve military force in their ancient history, and so were the perfect *physical* complement and a counterpoint to the spiritually inspired *Black* Essyllwyr should the *cychwyn* be declared and the Horn of Bran activated, releasing these two spiritually and culturally strengthened bodies to crush the tyrant Afyn and to destroy his wicked Coritanau. Seen as infinitely more important than the threat to their southern coast, the venerated Corionototau were now needed to come together again after so long, and after so much had changed here in the once more fracturing midlands. They were to be one horn of this 'bull of war' Cadallan and Iddel were bringing to this physical and esoteric battle both, and with Llefelys' white dragons and Lludd's notorious *Black*

Essyllwyr being the other, powerful forces were gathering and all heading toward the tortured heart of this great nation of kingdoms. With this shared goal in mind, the Carfetan general will assist the Corieltaufi there to reorganise and to take back governance of those lands, but they will need the werrin army; the glorious *Corionototau* in the vanguard if they are to pull it off. This legendary and almost forgotten 'people's militia' will only go to battle if the *Horn of Bran* is blown; that piece of monumental Brythonic legend which sits atop CaerCorion, now an enemy Coritana fortress. That ancient stronghold had been the Corieltaufi's capital caer in the past and before it was taken from them by Coritana, and it had always been called CaerElsaforde in their glorious history. It will become so again if Cadallan, Iddel, Lludd and Llefelys are successful, establishing an important guarded settlement for that midland tribe as it reassembles in the coming year. The town elders of the once scattered Corieltaufi, those who had been privately chosen by their people to represent the highly secretive Corionototau had answered the call from the long absent King Alaric, to reunite and to prepare themselves for the imminent holy calling. This much respected *Coriel* monarch had reemerged to lead this armed insurrection, and the brave werrin of midland Breged prepared for this uprising under his new but unconfirmed rule in their thousands. Legally and spiritually prevented from action and agreeing to the *arlwyod* only, these people remained at home in hundreds of disparate groups for now, all earnestly preparing for the call to arms. Huddled in their towns, villages and crofts, stoically awaiting an ancient call to arms nobody alive had ever heard, they had agreed to the 'preparation' only at this stage. The woolly white, *gadfly* badges of King Llefelys ap Beli Mawr's invention were issued, but these were kept hidden still as Afyn's spies and his agents were all identified and watched. Swords, daggers, spears, pikes, and sickles had all been whetted and honed, and the frantic werrin of a fraught Coritana were finally ready. However prepared and committed to this necessary revolution they were, they would not and could not sally forth to the great maes designated as their forward assembly point until they heard that mythical, booming sound their grandparents had spoken

about in hushed and revered tones. Those elders had been giving handed down history themselves those years ago, gleaned from their own elderly grandparents, none of whom had heard it in their own lifetimes either. None in almost six generations had, and without that ancient and unknown blast, the Corionototau were powerless and both religiously and legally prevented from completing the calling. If heart-breaking silence prevailed, they would just return to their enclosures and to their thatches inconsolable, and there, these oppressed midland werrin would accept whatever would befall them in the pitiful aftermath. The *cychwyn*; the legitimising 'rise' could be simply declared by the priesthood of Khumry in view of Afyn and Cartysman's crimes, and the *Black* Essyllwyr just as directly summoned by them, but that was just one side of this brewing conflagration to come. The *Aer y Derwydd* would repair to Khymru once an almost assured victory was gained, and so some form of governance needed to be put in place for these midland territories to recover once those irrepressible men had left with their prize. There was a critical spiritual problem attached to this insurrection to solve, one which was unknown to the masses, and so the Corionototau were considered instrumental in addressing the religious element to this great national calamity. Should the perfidious Gods of Prydein accede to the restitution of the ancient Corieltau and should the two Bregantan gŵyr charged with activating the war horn succeed against all the odds, the *gollwng* will be declared by the priests of Breganta and the Corionototau will be legally 'released'. They will then sweep joyfully from their homesteads and villages to a never before heard blast of old warfare. The midland werrin would do this en-masse once given the *gollwng*, and coming from all points of the compass to join up on the broad expanse of Fro Gwyn with whatever they could arm themselves with, the Gods themselves will be forced to sit up and to take notice. Joined in heart, mind and resolution on this historic day to come, the long burdened werrin of these vales will storm north in their vengeance and together in family groups. All will proudly sport their white woolly badges of membership, and nothing on this earth will deflect or prevent them once released. Before any of this

could take place however, somehow, the protected and *untested* Horn of Bran *Galed* himself must be unlocked and activated, a fraught and daunting procedure which was steeped in myth and shrouded in mystery. Unseen by all but an elite few in many generations, that veritable treasure of Prydein had been secreted atop the most fiercely guarded tower in all Bregead those centuries past, and it was located deep inside the black heart of that major enemy fortress to this day. To even get near it those brave men would need a blessing from their Gods, and just to gain the roof of that highly guarded tower, especially if they were under attack would require a minor miracle. Then they had to activate that ancient stone and metal legend in some unknown manner, which itself was a puzzle of no mean challenge by any stretch of the imagination, but more vitally, they had no sure knowledge that the aged thing would work. Even if they were somehow able to approach it and to activate it on that antediluvian and perilous roof, they were not certain of its operational status. There were so many unknowns in that particularly fraught venture, it was thought by many to be a complete waste of time and life. Although this daring, and some would say suicidal assignment was well in hand, in view of its seemingly impossible demands and conditions, none of these anxious werrin held their breath while they waited for Bran's holy blast and the freedom of the subsequent *gollwng*. This scattered multitude with the white woolly insects pinned to their pounding breasts, *under* their mantles for now and proudly clutching the tools of their living became silent in their thatches as the hour approached, and a breathless tension seemed to suspend all southern Coritana in its thrall. As these thousands of anxious people's attention turned toward the coast and to CaerCorion with their ears straining through the moaning of the wind, they prayed for that galvanising but unheard and unknown sound as they all waited.

* * * * *

Eidyn was exhausted in all senses, and the haggard look on his comrade's face this night told its own tale of reciprocal suffering. Neither had slept for many hours since their fight with those three assassins and creeping

about for the last four of those hours had sapped their last reserves of energy, yet there was so much more to do this night. Their journey to CaerCorion had been especially nerve wracking as murderous *viper* troops seemed to be everywhere, and they were constantly fearful of more of their *elite* assassins dogging them. They found King Afyn's horsemen and spearmen to be stationed in every town and village throughout this eastern seaboard as if the king had been alerted to this night's rebellious endeavour; an entirely credible possibility. It had unnerved these two gŵyr, as they were on a sworn mission that simply could not fail. The very future of these midland tribes and so much more was at stake should they fail tonight, and with martial law declared across Coritana, each mile they stole through these lands deepened their fears. This creeping fear which grew and gnawed at them as they neared their destination sought to undermine their shared self-confidence and to cast doubt on their ability to carry out this incredible task demanded of them. So much depended on their success tonight and so many lives hung in the balance, it terrified them. Knowing too that a healthy measure of penance was invested in their agreed undertaking, they were left with precious little choice in reality. Both were swordsmen of note however, and both were lords and landed tumon of Breganta no less, neither achieving these stellar successes through timidity, and so they pressed on regardless but with the greatest of care. Governed entirely by the moon in the cloud strewn sky above them, Eidyn and Cydwas would wait until it sailed behind a black cloud before they would break cover and continue onwards in silence. Only when they had thoroughly checked their rear did they move on each time, often leading their horses quietly through the trees of each wooded sector in great loops, ever watchful and observant for sight or sound of other horsemen, or more deadly assassins. Finally, they made the meeting point roughly in time, and were greeted there by two grisly looking warriors in nondescript clothing, revealing nothing of their identities or their loyalties. It was only when the correct watchword was repeated by both parties that the tension dissipated between them, and the four men retreated as a group into the dense shadows of these woods.

Within half an hour, all these men were looking up at the frontal walls of CaerCorion, silently, unseen and from another of this vast forest's fringes. That fortress' high and flag adorned towers studded a stout surrounding palisade, all rising to the starlit heavens above its hilltop location. Bran's Tower could not be seen from here, but CaerCorion's impressive and impenetrable looking gatehouse and its overhead killing gantry could, and that daunting monstrosity was studded with lit torches and the thrumming, infamous viper banners of Afyn.

These two Bregantan lords had soon changed from their woodsmen's clothing into the finery they had brought with them in two large satchels. Once resplendent in the clothing and accoutrements of power, they took back the reins of their horses which had been prepared for them in a similar manner by their new allies, and finally they were ready to play their part. Knowing that thousands more Corionototau rebels were furtively preparing for battle across these lands and in these forests around and behind them did nothing for their apprehension as they rode up to the main gates of CaerCorion, trying to remain as relaxed as possible in their saddles. Aping the body language and the posture of two weary and long-travelled lords, the physical performance at least came easily and belied the emotional turmoil both felt inside as the master of the gates came out to challenge them. They had been here twice before on legitimate business, but that would carry little weight to their request for refuge at this hour and in this fraught political climate. Eidyn's gruff and aristocratic demands left the gate master no alternative but to allow them entry, as although the ruling power of Breged was an ephemeral thing presently, the fact that they were obviously wealthy Bregantan lords still added enough weight to their legitimate claim for sanctuary. Eidyn's imperious, no-buts attitude gained them both swift entry, and in minutes they were inside. Escorted from the gatehouse by an armed guard, they were greeted by an *arwein* in a comfortable and well-lit welcome chamber and there shown the expected hospitality. Once refreshed at the large banqueting hall and served by the sleepy stewards still on duty, their attendant *arwein* had showed them their billet for the night. Once this

serious young man had departed, no doubt to his own bracken, Eidyn and Cydwas were thankfully left to their own devices. It was dark and there were very few people still about at this late hour, and thankful for this, the pair set forth to attempt their fateful mission. Leaving nothing in their undisturbed guest chambers, together they set out to explore this huge caer in the dark hours and when its pathways and hallways were all but deserted.

Those who could be seen scurrying around the stony passageways and chambers of this huge fortress now were the ever-busy slaves and servants, who, burdened by their duties ignored them completely from habit. They had bluffed their way into this great caer, and once left alone to wander its empty halls and corridors, they made their stealthy way out of these adjoined and thatched, public buildings and over its inner parade ground. Stepping softly under the stars toward the northwestern corner tower, they stealthily circumvented the well-lit and busy great hall in the centre of this vast grassy interior, managing to traverse the whole fortress unchallenged.

The rugged, stone built, and rectangular monstrosity which loomed over them now in the encroaching darkness looked down over everything in this deeply shadowed fortress. It also clearly overlooked everything outside of this huge caer for many miles including the valley it commanded, for it was the tallest man-made structure in the whole territory. This was the oldest, highest and the most weather beaten of all the watchtowers around this great fortress, and it was the most substantial for a particularly good reason. Forming one whole corner of this vast caer, this towering edifice was part of the ancient and original square keep. This hoary old structure had been built far more robustly to its circular counterparts studding this palisaded perimeter, even the twin gatehouse bastions. Bran's Tower was twice the size of all the other round and timber framed watchtowers surrounding this huge fortress, and it was distinctly rectangular, having thicker walls at its mighty feet to support its substantial weight and the massive stonework it had been built from those

centuries ago. Squarer at its highest reaches, Bran's Tower had been necessarily hugely built to accommodate the antediluvian monument on its crown, and whose fluted mouth could be seen curving into the night sky high above them now and the plain below. It was as if a colossal, black metal daffodil was growing out from the roof of that tower, high among the stars, and it was astounding to behold especially from directly below it. Eidyn and Cydwas stood looking up at the fluted mouth of that great horn with their necks craned and with their mouths hanging, and both swallowed noisily at the sight. It soared among the stars. It was far taller and far more imposing than either had bargained for several days previously; the day when they had agreed to this hair-brained mission and the chance to clear their names, however slim and perilous that was. With a nudge from Cydwas, Eidyn's attention was drawn to their next challenge; the iron gate which was set into the circular sweep of stone foundation walls to the right of Bran's Tower and which supported the high timber palisade all around this caer. This long disused exit opened out onto the servant's lane outside and which snaked around this fortress, and a left turn once through this rusty old gate would see you downhill to the marshy ground before the town. The river Puro cuts through that low and oft flooded plain where the downtrodden werrin of the town live, whereas the royal apartments and the barracks of this stronghold were uphill to the right of this exit and the other side of the huge frontal gatehouse. This old gate was deeply corroded from its patent lack of use, and they somehow had to get it open. There was a monstrous drop-gate suspended above this opening, clearly intended for times of crisis before the outer palisade had been erected, and it had been forged from thick and heavily riveted bars of iron which were now furry with the rust of many decades. The sharpened lower points of this crude portcullis still looked fearsome however, and neither man relished being pinned to the earth by its row of brown and flaking teeth. The whole trellised and hanging, reddish-brown structure looked perilous, and the thick chains which kept this massively heavy siege-gate held in position over their exit looked as rusty and as seized up as their long-neglected burden. Due to

the renovation of this stronghold's huge kitchens and its refectory on Afyn's ascension, the servants and slaves used the northern gate for their constant toing and froing now, and had done for many years, leaving the western corner gate below Bran's Tower to rust slowly into retirement. Since its redundancy and the increased security offered by the huge and more recent *outer* palisade, this ancient opening in the caer's inner walls had drifted from most people's memories. Eidyn bravely passed under the heavily rusted and suspended siege-gate and stepped up to the equally rusted iron gate under it. Peering to his left through its flaky bars and toward the town's western approaches, Eidyn could see through these rough iron rods that this ancient access and exit point was protected by the massive and unassailable size of the battlements around him, but also now by the huge outer palisade and its impressive external gates, looming darkly in the hazy distance. That vast, curving row of sharpened tree trunks surrounded a large part of the town below and the sadly now polluted, inner section of the afon *Puro* running through it. It used to run with the sweetest and purest of water which had been filled with wild trout, being a very big reason why the old Corieltaufi kings had taken this vale for their palace fortress and market town. That enclosed town below them had developed in the last decade as all towns must, and Tref Corion had exceeded its protected boundaries, spilling out into the maes outside that new palisade and along both banks of the Puro. Trade was relentless, and the toing and froing of those people living directly outside the main entrance was constant, and so those outer gates were left open throughout the day. The werrin had free passage in and out of this western, civilian sector, and security at that gated access point to the *inner* market town outside and below Bran's mighty tower was relaxed despite the martial law across Coritana. From the sheer necessity of business and the volume of foot and cart traffic coming in and out of those gates every daylight hour of each day and in all thirteen months of the year, CaerCorion's outer defensive structure in this western corner was almost redundant. Struggling to ignore the rusty and agonising death locked in suspension over him and with his pulse racing, Eidyn saw a long

line of dark mantled and soot smudged warriors with huge eyes crouching in the shadows outside and in the shallow ditch alongside this lane. They were clearly awaiting his success with this rusted gate and his corresponding signal for their entry, and his mouth dried up instantly at the knowledge. One or two slaves could be seen walking past them in the dark, heading down toward the flickering torches of the distant town to his left, but they ignored the rebels completely. It suddenly dawned on Eidyn that just about every working person, every servant and every slave knew what was happening here tonight, and it turned his blood to ice water. With an apprehensive shiver running up his spine, Eidyn turned to his partner in crime and held his hand out wriggling his fingers, and with his fear and impatience mounting.

“Come on Cydwas, we only have minutes!” Eidyn growled as his comrade rummaged in his jute bag behind him for the tool. It was soon slapped into his gloved hand, and Eidyn set about the ancient pin lock, which in times of constant use would have been a simple matter to just lift the pin out of the ring and leave it hanging on its chain. Corrosion had taken its degenerative toll over time however and had welded all the pieces together. Eidyn had been forewarned of this and had the prybar brought for this very purpose, and with a few frantic twists and furious tugs, he managed to free the chained pin and wrench the rusty gate open. The loud and hair-raising *screech* the gate’s equally corroded ‘pin and eye’ hinges let out at this sudden disturbance shocked them both to the core, and it rebounded around these walls like a tortured raven and literally raised the hair along both their forearms. The pair stood rooted to the spot and turned, their huge eyes flashing to the massive and well-lit, rectangular great hall across this parade ground, fully expecting armed soldiers to come charging around its corner at any moment. As they waited frozen in that position and with their wide eyes swivelling at each other, the rebels began to pour through the open gate behind them, and it broke this fearful spell, galvanising them both. They headed for the great oak door at the foot of Bran’s tower together now and as their protective force built steadily and gathered around them. Both were relieved that the

unholy sound of the old gate had raised no alarm or concern from the great hall, being drowned out by the sounds of drunken revelry within no doubt. Looking gravely at each other as more of these dark figures streamed in through the opening behind them and under the drop gate, both knew they were committed now come what may. With a dour nod of acceptance from Eidyn, they both moved to the great iron riveted oak door at the foot of this monstrous building towering over them.

“Leave the talking to me Cydwas!” Eidyn rumbled for the second time tonight. “We just need to get close enough!” He added lugubriously once more, holding the door open for his combrogi, who ducked through the doorway, scowling at his words.

“Lug’s arse Eidyn keep your voice down, you know these walls have ears!” Cydwas reproved him in a forced whisper, entering the base of this huge rectangular, stone-built and echoing watchtower and looking around himself at his own words in fear, as CaerCorion and all Coritana had become a very dangerous place suddenly.

“I know Cydwas. He has spies everywhere, and the hair on my neck is standing at the thought of that murderous little *gwain* knowing our business here this night.” Eidyn responded more quietly and with a low growl, holding the door open for their new companions.

“You know as well as I do this is suicide!” Cydwas informed him in the same hoarse whisper and not for the first time. “Even if the bloody thing works, we’ll never get away with it!” He added, grabbing Eidyn’s arm, his nerve wilting now the moment was at hand. His comrade and neighbouring tumon of Breged was made of sterner stuff however and just glowered at him as the ground floor of Bran’s Tower around them filled with dark mantled rebel warriors.

“What choice do we have Cydwas? Show me a way out of this where we both keep our heads on our necks, and I will be all yours my old friend.” Eidyn told him with a rasp, his patience running thin. He shook the man’s hand brusquely off his arm. “You know we have been placed between a

bull and a stag in all this, and our duty is now clear, we must activate the Horn of Bran to release the Corionototau, as nobody else is in the position to do it as you well know!" He told his grey-haired companion quietly, holding his gaze with an uncompromising look on his broad face that Cydwas knew only too well. "Even the spiritual fate of our mother country is in the balance, if you believe the frantic Khumric priesthood and all the clamouring druidry of this country." He added in a low whisper, throwing up his hands. Cydwas lowered his eyes as he had no challenge to the truth in Eidyn's growling whisper, and he nodded, being equally and fatally compromised. Fearless and notoriously ferocious in any open fight, Cydwas was not so confident with this cloak and dagger stuff. He looked up the sturdy box staircase climbing the inside of these walls with a grim expression as it vanished into that square, black hole in the ceiling above him with an ominous sweep into shadow. This prematurely grey-haired but heavily muscled, landed noble took a deep breath, knowing too that he was now just as fatally committed as his oldest friend. Not just his hard-earned titles and assets were at stake here tonight, he knew their very lives hung in the balance of the outcome. Taking the apron of this heavy timber staircase which had been constructed with huge beams of green oak and which were silver and deeply grained now from their great age, Eidyn led the way up. They both began the long slog to the watchman's lodge at the crown of this western corner tower and to where Bran's legendary guardroom was also housed. Cydwas climbed the same scalloped, ancient wooden steps and turned the same footworn corners carefully behind his comrade, and the stark truth in the man's words made his breathing heavier and was reflected on his haggard face as he followed him up. Both these men wore the overt symbols of their status and their wealth tonight as they trod these ancient, notorious stairs. This was for a particularly good reason, from the expensive bear furs to the gold trinkets and the fine weaponry, as it was expected of such wealthy and landed cattle barons, however ephemeral those titles were presently. Leaving their silent and dark clothed comrades at the foot and with lookouts posted outside, Eidyn and Cydwas were the very image of

wealthy and successful Brythonic lords as they climbed these dished and silvered stairs to the head, but their expressions were anything but smug this night, as sometimes success demands an onerous price, and occasionally it even demands sacrifice. Now and again, it can even challenge one's loyalties.

It was almost midnight, and CaerCorion; Afyn's great fortress was dark and quiet, with not a soul abroad in the hallways of this great caer, except the odd steward or servant who patrolled the many corridors and chambers far below. There was also a smattering of soldiery they noted and which manned the fighting platforms behind the high and sharp palisades of this fortress in three shifts, although in a relaxed manner and in much reduced numbers despite the circumstances. Eidyn and Cydwas had bypassed DunCoriel in the darkness and had pushed on east toward the coast to be here at a peaceful CaerCorion just short of the prescribed and sacred hour, and the stars above them counted down the remaining minutes to their terrifying and imminent contribution to this insurrection. As they cleared the second flight of stairs, they came out through another oak door set into one side of this tower, and it emerged onto a broad walkway. This stout timber structure was attached to this tower and the palisades reaching out from it to both sides, and it was suspended high above a corner of the parade ground below, allowing the watchmen access to their patrol routes along these western palisades. As the western approaches were so secure, the two long and diverging lengths of timber fighting platforms running from this corner tower were virtually deserted this night. On this broad timber apron and directly to their right lay the ultimate reaches of Bran's mighty tower, and two big timber doors. One huge guard stood outside the solid oak door to the guardroom alongside him, and he also guarded the far more solid looking door beyond that and behind him. This larger and secondary entrance led up the final staircase and to the square roof of Bran's tower, but it was off limits to all unauthorised personnel. This tall and muscular guard bowed to these two unfamiliar lords with a friendly and respectful nod at their unexpected appearance, but he stood to attention nonetheless to demand

their business at his station, as this was a late hour and he was well within his authority. A handbell was mounted on a bracket outside the door to the guardroom beside him, and which itself lay before the door guarding the steps leading up to the Tower of Bran. Nobody could climb further up Bran's tower without the key to its huge door, and without first passing the guardhouse door alongside it and the big man in front of it, standing under his brass bell. It was handily fixed to the wall of his station and so that he could call out his sleeping companions if they were needed, and their on-duty comrade was well positioned to do just that. Eidyn and Cydwas were dressed in their finery purposefully as their image had stolen any sense of threat from this sleepy guard, instantly putting him on the back foot. This big security man challenged them anyway as they approached as was his sworn duty, but he did so respectfully and deferentially, giving them the brief moments they so desperately needed to get close enough. Before this burly guard could utter a word, Eidyn forestalled him with a raised finger, and with the haughty demeanour expected of a landed tumon and a wealthy Bregantan lord.

"We need access to the tower, so fetch the key." Gŵyr Eidyn barked at the man, hardly pausing in his approach and with a dour look on his face. This guardian of the watchtower was not so easily commanded by complete strangers, and although these men were obviously lords of Breged, having received recent orders regarding the horn he stood his ground, waking up quickly.

"On whose authority my lord?" This big man asked Eidyn politely and with another curt bow, but it clearly had no effect on this angry noble.

"This man is the Lord who governs our royally warranted engineers!" Eidyn hooked his thumb at Cydwas behind him. "He needs to inspect the mechanism, and urgently man, so go and fetch your key and open that bloody door!" Eidyn snarled at him, advancing still.

The guard stiffened at this naked aggression, his right-hand flinching toward the dagger at his hip just as his left began to rise ominously

toward the rope dangling from the bell, but it was already too late. Eidyn brought the footlong blade from behind his back in a flash, and he plunged it mercilessly into this guard's throat, thrusting hard. The blade tore through his windpipe and jarred against the man's spine horribly, causing him to drop to the ground without a whimper, but alarmingly with a loud *thump*. They both had to kneel on him quickly and trap his legs to stop his feet thrumming loudly on the boards, and Eidyn and Cydwas looked at each other and at the guardroom door in fear as he thrashed under them, but there was no sound coming from within as the *custodians of the horn* were obviously and thankfully sound asleep as hoped. Even in the open, the metallic stink of freshly spilled blood filled their nostrils, and as the body of this dead guard relaxed under them into an eternal stillness, Eidyn reclaimed his blade with trembling fingers. The blood pouring from the hideous rent in this dead man's throat steamed in this cold night air, and it was painted in broad red streaks across these glistening planks as they dragged him off this landing, but it began to ease now as Eidyn and Cydwas hauled him through the door and to the head of the old and silvered staircase. It could be heard dripping through the gaps in these ancient timbers underfoot now, but this guard was unmoving and as dead as a doornail. Had he managed to ring the bell and bring out his six comrades and those on the flanking battlements, these two secret agents would have been in dire trouble, as the head of these stairs and the landing which housed this tower guardroom were cunningly designed to be easily defended by just that; a handful of soldiers. The *custodians* and just those small and unaware groups of patrolling guards to either side of this tower could have overpowered Eidyn and Cydwas in a flash had they been warned, and together they could have gone on to defend the head of these stairs indefinitely due to its ingenious construction. Now, it would serve the same purpose and for their own endeavours this night. This then was the *first* and an invaluable part in their perilous venture, and Cydwas moved to the head of these dripping stairs and gave out a low whistle. Soft footsteps could be heard rushing up to join them, and soon, this blood-spattered stairhead and its attached

platform was filling with vaguely familiar warriors. The dead guard was levered off this high landing, where he landed on the dirt below with a sickening thud, clearly audible from the head of these old stairs. Without a word, crouching men moved menacingly out of this door and to the left and right of these lofty walkways, and these smiling devils swiftly and silently murdered those heavy-eyed lookouts with their daggers. The door to the guard room was then kicked open by their comrades and the rebels poured in. Following a few moments of muted and swiftly curtailed screaming, silence returned to this corner of CaerCorion and the tower of Bran in particular. As the custodians of the horn were slaughtered in their beds and their dead comrades thrown in among them, the big and brassy, highly decorated key to the ultimate tower was discovered in its niche.

Eidyn and Cydwas quickly unlocked this bigger adjacent door with this worn but still fabulous key, and they charged up the final staircase leading up to the very top of this enormous and now square tower. Arriving breathlessly at another oak door at the head of these rickety and ancient steps, they could both see that it was a sad and aged affair which obviously opened out onto the roof. This loose old door had no lock just a large iron ring attached to a drop latch, and so with a twist and a hearty shove, they were both out into the cold and still air of this historic night again. Under a billion stars, they stood on the highest manmade point across all these lands, and with a shock of realisation, both accepted finally that they had cast their dies and that their very lives now rested in the laps of their Gods. The view of the starlit land around them was breathtaking over the two-foot stone parapet which enclosed this roof space, as neither had been up to this legendary tower, nor had they ever stood at such dizzying heights on any structure made by man before. This stunning view to their right swept down into the deeply shadowed valley below them and into a black eternity, making them entirely nervous as this highest part of the tower seemed to sway under them. They soon realised that this was merely a sensation, and so they looked at each other now in this ancient doorway with pale and drawn faces. Looking across the rough planking underfoot and to the massive horn assembly in

the far corner of this roof with obvious apprehension, these two wide eyed men steeled themselves. The Horn of Bran had been built solid and square into the far wall countless years ago, from huge stone blocks and at the furthest side of this perilous looking roof. With Eidyn leading the way, they moved quickly to it, ignoring the strange and swaying sensation and the alarming creaking underfoot. Bran's massively square tower had thicker walls to support this huge monument at its crown and whose fluted mouth protruded into the night sky now, high above them and the valley floor far below this hilltop caer. It looked as if a vast black flower was growing out from that impressive shrine and then curving out and over the roof of this tower. The horn itself was a monstrous black and tapering, many-sided cone of wrought iron, fixed in form by a long row of rivets along the seam each as thick as a man's thumb. This huge metal flower had been coated with some ancient black substance when it had been created and which had protected it these countless years from corrosion. From its foot, and craning their necks once more, they could both see that Bran's legendary horn possessed a fluted and gaping maw which could swallow a whole cow with ease. It was easily twenty feet in length and equal that in diameter at its mouth, curving upwards and outwards over the embrasure of this enclosed roof. The archaic, granite base below this gigantic and curving metal horn had been carved and sculpted long ages ago, and its weathered planes and once crisp angles were soft and deeply discoloured now with that same great age, but it was an impressive structure, nonetheless. Looking at it now with a sense of awe, it was difficult for either man to imagine the challenges which the old builders who had mounted it here had faced. A life sized, horned head of the God Cornonnyn had been sculpted out of the two facing, lichen encrusted stone doors of the horn's footings in deep relief, and that terrifying God's hollow mouth was agape in readiness for his offering. Below this chilling and divided visage of the terrible horned God were five worn granite blocks emerging from the structure like a row of lower teeth. Each was splashed grey and yellow with lichen and protruding upward from their niches set tight before these doors, and together they blocked the

opening. Below them and protruding outwards was a similar row of five, almost identical stone blocks, these set horizontally into the spaces below the upper stones and in a lower course. Each sat within its own rectangular slot covered in lichen and green moss, and these men could see through the encrustation and the furry green, or the leathery grey or yellow growth that an ancient symbol was carved upon the face of each one. This then was the puzzle Eidyn and Cydwas were to solve before they could make the sacred incantations, and so they both crouched before the terrifying and divided face on this stone plinth. Eyeing these five deeply weathered locking stones and the equally ancient looking ones below them with the symbols carved upon them seriously, Eidyn and Cydwas considered well their next moves, as they had one attempt and one only. If they got the sequence wrong there was no second chance, and they along with all their men on the next landing protecting them will have wasted their time and their lives. If there was some flaw anywhere in the secret and previous preparations of others or in this looming procedure of their own the horn will not be revealed, and there will be no way to activate it to call out the Corionototau. All will then be lost. Should they manage to get it open, there was still no guarantee that the contraption would even work correctly as this structure housing it looked untouched for long ages, and so their mission here was a fraught one at best. The top and vertical row of ancient stones was unmarked, but the worn-out symbols on the stones below them were just legible through the lichen and the moss, and the first was the flowing design of a galloping horse at full stretch. The next in line was the equally stylised but unmistakable figure of a long-horned bull leaping. The third horizontal stone displayed the cunning outline of a stalking wolf on its pitted face, whilst the next one along showed the form of a sacred hare throwing up its back legs. The final protruding stone bore the worn carving of a proud stag's head on its weathered countenance and under a big orange splash of lichen, and these two men looked at each other gravely as the responsibility settled heavily about their shoulders at that electrifying moment. These crude but iconic symbols meant many things to many people, tapping into the

deepest parts of their cultural and tribal upbringing. The picture stones had to be pushed into their recesses one at a time and in the correct order of importance before the correct locking stones above them could then be pushed down to clear the doors, and so the choice and the procedure was a complex one to any uninformed operator. There was only one correct sequence and only one opportunity to get it right, and so Eidyn's palms were sweating as he reached nervously for the *bull* stone.

"Are you sure the bull is first?" His ever-doubtful partner queried with wide eyes, just as he was about to press the second stone in the row inward, and his hand froze. Eidyn shook his head and he glowered at Cydwas.

"Cnuch me Cydwas, it's always the same with you! Have a little faith!" He growled at his partner, but he was frowning too now as he frantically recounted Lludd Llaw Ereint's serious instructions however simplified, not sure himself anymore, and he cursed Cydwas' infectious uncertainty, running through the rhyme he had learned at the hand of a legend again in his furious mind. *'The bull takes the van as he is most able, pursued by grey horses from Hector's great stable. Next comes the stag, the pride of Fidach, and whilst the wolf stalks the middle protecting the dear, the druid's sacred hare brings up the rear.'* Taking another deep breath, Eidyn pushed this rough locking stone inwards hard, and the *bull* stone moved roughly forward with a grinding sound until it hit a stop. Eidyn then shoved the corresponding locking stone above it downwards lending his weight to it, and with a similar crunching sound, it too slid roughly down into its granite hole. Eidyn then pushed in the horse stone before then depressing the first locking stone on the left of these double doors of crusty and ancient stone. So far, so good. Next, he shoved the stag stone fully home but had to push with his knee as it caught in its rough embrasure. With some urgent shoving, this stone too finally hit its stop, allowing Eidyn to depress the last locking stone in the row down fully. Then it was number three and the wolf, followed lastly by number five and the druid's sacred hare stone, and those rough pairs too ground fully

home. Now the doors were free to open it was the time for the 'incantations and the blood' as all things Brythonic come in threes, and so Cydwas fell to his knees before Arglwydd Cornonnyn. He closed his eyes to remember his own more complex rhyme, and he began to recite these ancient words as with stark eyes, Eidyn drew his dagger above and behind him.

Shouting could be heard now from all the levels below, and it seems that the clandestine element of their subterfuge had finally unravelled. Abruptly there were alarm calls ringing shrilly through this caer, chilling these two valiant men atop its highest tower to the core. It was possible their arrival had finally been noted by someone in authority, or perhaps it was the abandoned western palisades which had caused this alarm, or maybe the gate below had been left open and the dead guard discovered it was impossible to tell, but frantic blasts on a horn came from somewhere in this fortress now, and cursing and shouting soldiers could clearly be heard gathering in the parade ground below. In minutes, dozens of heavy warboots were pounding up the aged timber staircases of Bran's tower, and their men on the landing below were thrust into frantic defensive action. The sudden but unseen clashing of steel galvanised these two men on this open roof, and with their hearts racing they continued with the procedure, but their fingers were trembling now as the fear of being cornered here with no escape had gripped them both. At the correct moment in Cydwas' breathless monotone, and with a slight wince, Eidyn drew the blade of his dagger across the palm of his left hand and cut it deeply, quickly re-sheathing his blade as the blood puddled in his cupped hand. As Cydwas finished the very ancient englyn and the complex and rhyming, sacred entreaty to the horned one who guards this edifice, Eidyn poured his hot blood into the God's open mouth of stone, and it vanished down Cornonnyn's divided and dry granite gullet without a sound. The deed was done, the triad complete and the sequence finished, and now both men stood up to gawp at this monstrous contraption before them. Side-by-side, they frantically waited for the stone gates of this ancient mechanism to open as the crashing of arms and the clamour of

battle in this fortress swelled alarmingly around them. The sounds of fighting and screaming men seemed to be approaching quickly and rising up this tower with a dread inexorability, but still nothing happened. Looking at each other in horror, it became clear that nothing *was* going to happen.

“My Gods Eidyn, we’re all doomed!” Cydwas moaned, the tragedy clear in his tone and on his pale face, but his comrade was not so fatalistic, grabbing him by the arms and shaking him roughly.

“Get a grip Cydwas! We’re not finished yet. Come on man, think! I know we got the sequence right, but why doesn’t the bastard thing work?” Eidyn challenged him hoarsely as swords clashed and dying men shrieked terribly just behind and below them, unnerving them equally. The panic building in them now was a terrible thing, almost overwhelming them both, and it took all their resolve to quash it. Eidyn broke from his distraught and immobilised partner, drew his sword with a curse and attempted to prise the two stone doors apart with the tip inserted in the crack below Cornonnyn’s nose, but Eidyn could not penetrate the tight gap anywhere even a fraction.

“Lubrication?” Cydwas muttered, looking fearfully at the tower door behind them.

“What about lubrication!” Eidyn snapped, bringing his partner’s head and his attention back to him.

“Er, the blood I mean. It may be to lubricate something inside to let it move. I don’t know, I’m only guessing.” Cydwas grumbled, not able to stop himself staring at that door behind him again and which looked infinitely more fragile now, and Eidyn jumped, re-sheathing his sword quickly. His hand still bled although the flow had eased, but with some vigorous manipulation he reopened the congealing wound, and the red liquid flowed once more. Eidyn let more of his blood trickle into the abutted stone mouth of this fearsome carving, and from sudden afterthought he took a flask from his belt, pulled the cork with his teeth,

and poured all this fiery spirit too down Cornonnyn's gaping mouth. As the liquor gurgled down this inanimate God's granite throat and mixed with his blood, he sent it all with a fleeting but earnest prayer. As the panic welled up savagely inside him again he stood straight once more but on shaky legs, and yet still nothing happened. The sounds of fighting and screaming were closer now and approaching that oak door, which was their only remaining protection, but still they stared at this inert stone monument, willing it to open, praying for it to open. Still nothing, and the panic began a distinctly arachnid crawl up their flushing throats.

Eidyn could feel the scream of frustration about to burst from him, and he kicked at the immovable stone housing in his rising frustration and his anger, but all he achieved was a pain in his foot. As the clamour of their certain capture and a horrible death encroached unseen up those stairs behind them, their breathing became laboured and their hearts turned to stone. Despite this biting cold, both men began to sweat freely now, and standing shoulder to shoulder they held up their swords. Together, Eidyn and Cydwas *Llwyd* turned to face their doom and that frail old door. Even as the landing below was designed for defence and their comrades had made the utmost from its advantage, they were obviously hard pressed from the clamouring guards of this fortress. CaerCorion's soldiers massively outnumbered their allied but isolated *combrogî*, and whilst the twisted approach to the landing below restricted their attackers to two men at a time, their enemy had a constant flow of fresh replacements and could not be held back indefinitely. It had not taken a genius to figure out what was going on in this fortress as rumours of the rebellion must have been rife across the region, and both men could hear furious action on the other side of that door now, the one with no lock; just a latch. Gripping their swords hard in fearful anticipation, their eyes were glued to that loose old door across this roof, and which by the sounds beyond it was now surrounded and embattled. Bodies began to thump against its weather-aged and gap-grained oaken planks, causing them to shiver as their newly familiar comrades died to bar access to it. Unseen, those brave warriors of Breged were courageously giving Eidyn and Cydwas

these precious but entirely superfluous seconds, and they looked at each other in shared and abject horror, the calamity crashing in on them fully now and weakening their knees. It was not just their own imminent deaths and this abject failure of their mission which was undoing them where they stood, but all that had been risked and by so many, and for naught it now seemed. Even the Gods seemed to add the weight of their stressful presence on this failing procedure as the stars seemed to have lowered noticeably, and an unseen force pressed down on them now as the holy moment; the beginning and the denouement of each sacred day approached. The very air around the Horn of Bran and this tower roof had become charged with some elemental, spiritual energy which could not be ignored as magical midnight loomed. Not seeing, but feeling the powerful spirits congregate around them on this open roof, their courage remained surprisingly, and as they silently prayed a sacred triad to Camulo, Lug and Brigida, some strength returned to their knees from somewhere. Both men hefted their swords once more and stood tall, side by side and under the Beltain stars of their fate, accepting perhaps for the first time that their time on this glorious earth was finally at an end. With no real alternative, these two old and trusted friends stood together facing the entrance to this roof with grim and fatalistic expressions, and their hearts were hammering in the syncopated, galloping rhythm now of that building, panicky compulsion to flight or fight. With only one of those stark and primal options open to them, it was obvious the other side of that timber bastion before them was witnessing the most furious fighting, and with no escape possible it would soon be their turn. They looked at each other again now, the stark knowledge of this wretched disaster mirrored on each other's pale and tragic faces. With the Horn of Bran fatally mute behind them and their doomed rebellion dying horribly in its womb, Eidyn nodded to Cydwas with his eyes glittering. With his lips compressed, Cydwas returned the nod just as grimly, as there was nothing left to say between these old and battle-tested comrades. Unknown to either, a portentous midnight struck silently, powerfully and decisively across these midland territories, and as this brave duo prepared to meet whatever was

about to come crashing through that battered old door, the atmosphere on this enclosed roof lurched into the mystical and the supernatural, lifting the hair on their napes and forearms. Amid this hair-raising shift in ambiance, a faint groaning and grinding sound came from behind them at that charged moment, and which was almost drowned out by the commotion on those stairs. Their eyes met again, this time with a question. As they turned as one in surprise, this rumbling and quern like noise got louder, and a sandy dust began to *puff* and to fall from all the crevices of the stone-built plinth below that monstrous horn behind them. To their utter disbelief and their indescribable relief, the stone doors began to move apart and those lichen encrusted, pitted and deeply carved panels began to swivel open. Grinding, and dragging themselves across their stone base and over the faces of the five, flush locking stones, the two stone gates revolved outwards in two curving arcs. The stone face and Cornonnyn's horned but now divided head drew apart to reveal the interior of this ancient cyst, and neither man had thought to breathe for long moments. The sounds of their imminent discovery faded away into hollow echoes as these two men stared agape at this miraculous opening, and which had left two wet and curling score marks on the stone sill before it. The whole contraption smelled sharply of *wirod-mywyd*, but there before them was revealed the inner workings of the sacred and ancient Horn of Bran *Galed* himself, and they were both awestruck. A large, discoloured and lichen splashed boulder was exposed within, and it was perfectly round and mounted on a dished pillar of bronze at the back of this ancient, equally lichen encrusted chamber. This monstrously heavy stone was as round as a cartwheel and almost as big, with circular patches of yellow and grey, dry looking lichen clinging to its curving exterior here and there. Pitted and patinated, stained granite peeked through them and the patches of moss which shared the granite surface of this huge ball, all of which spoke proudly of its inestimable age. It was obvious in a flash to both men that this massive stone had to be lifted from its pillar of ages and placed onto another bronze, cup shaped receptacle, a lower one which had been set onto the stone capped

embrasure below and before it. Cydwas had seen the great warriors of the northern highlands lift these round boulders they called 'stones of destiny' for sport, and he knew what was required of him.

Only one man could fit into the stony embrace of this opening at once, and the commissioning of this huge monument had thus been designed to be a test of individual strength as well as a spiritual and an intellectual one. Cydwas was a muscular man, and regardless of his premature greying he was known for his unnatural strength, and without a moment's hesitation he bent to the task with his heart racing, as it was the biggest lifting stone he had ever seen. With unseen battle and the battering of aged timbers swelling behind them, spitting on his palms, Cydwas squatted and gripped this great stone ball, and he tested it, feeling the horrifying sense of resolute permanence in its grip of centuries on the pillar under it. Once he had scraped some of the moss from its surface at the back and to both sides where his hands came to rest, he strained against its verdigris encrusted seal on the heavy bronze cup supporting it again as the crashing on the door behind them increased, and Eidyn went to stand behind him with his sword and dagger drawn as a forlorn protector. Cydwas' forearms bulged as he took the strain again, but the stone did not budge. He was appalled at its immovable weight, but he was just warming up his great muscles. Gripping the rough, granite surface of this huge ball with his spread fingers again, Cydwas' face filled with the blood of his effort, and he grunted as his great shoulders bulged once more.

"Come on Cydwas, put your cnuching back into it!" Eidyn growled behind him.

Cydwas ignored him and moved his feet apart, gathering himself whilst still compressed into this uncomfortable crouch. Taking a series of deep breaths to charge his wind, he lifted properly for the first time. The stone's grip on its plinth faltered, and it shifted ever so slightly in its corroded bronze cup, giving Cydwas encouragement. He lifted with all his might then, his teeth grinding loudly with the effort. Sweat popped out all along

his forehead, and his arms shook uncontrollably from the colossal weight of this seemingly immovable boulder, but there was no quit in this impressive gŵyr. His backside dipped then as he put every ounce of strength into this lift, and this stone shifted properly for the first time. With another guttural grunt, Cydwas lifted it clear off its shelf and its ancient resting place of eons. His whole body vibrated now with the immense effort, and with his eyes bulging in his swollen and flushed face, he managed to slowly lower this stone of his own destiny. Shaking like a man with the *ague*, Cydwas carefully allowed this colossal stone to sink softly onto the smaller bronze cup before it. This was fixed to the lid of the huge bellows box under this whole structure, and infinitely slowly, the floor of this crusty chamber began to sink. Overpowering Cydwas' ragged panting and the rising clamour from behind the roof door, a loud *hissing* erupted from all the gaps to the stone cyst below. Compressed air exploded violently upwards and out through these openings, coming from the gaps around the massive set of bellows housed in the chamber under them and as the weight of that huge boulder began to depress the lid. Suddenly, a loud and booming detonation came bellowing from the mouth of that monstrous horn above them, so abruptly and so brutally, Eidyn dropped his sword with a clatter from the shock. He and Cydwas had to clap their hands over their ears from the pain it was so impossibly loud, and as the Horn of *Bran Galed* shook the very air around this tower with an unbelievable ferocity, they were compelled to yell silently in their fear and their agony. They could feel it make their whole bodies shake with its unholy and deafening, terrifying blare and it even made Eidyn vomit to the juddering planks underfoot. They reeled around this tower roof, heads in their hands and shouting with the pain as that monstrous, black, and fluted horn tore the world apart around them, vibrating the very stars above in their firmament. Even this massive tower was shuddering now from the awesome, bass discharge of Bran's fantastic war horn, shaking the dust from every crevice as it reached its awesome and concussive zenith, and even the fighting on the stairs had been stunned into inactivity by its rude and thunderous blast.

This ancient and now frantic stronghold had been the Corieltaufi's capital caer in the past, and which was always called CaerElsaforde in their history. It may be so again, now that these two recklessly committed individuals have completed their impossible mission. As many hundreds of dark warriors moved in to surround it, all with their hands clapped over their ears, they gained complete entry and moved in en-masse to vanquish it. Should these wildly animated rebels succeed, CaerCorion may provide an important guarded settlement for the Corieltaufi as that tribe reassembles in the coming year. However, the tyrant Afyn rules Coritana from his capital CaerLindon, and it is that daunting fortress which the people's militia must first vanquish before CaerCorion can once again become CaerElsaforde; the glorious citadel of the Corieltaufi.



Chapter Eighteen.

The *Horn of Bran* called out across all Coritana, and although its deep and bass lowing had not been heard for many generations, every soul in the midlands knew instantly what that *fell*, dread sound conveyed and what had caused it. This day of glorious revolution in tyrannical Coritana, the Horn of Bran just had to reach the surrounding towns and villages of the *Corionototau*; the people's militia. The white, woollen gadfly badges of Llefelys' creation had been brought out from hiding and released, to be disseminated among the trusted werrin leaders of this civilian army. Keeping to their plan of action, the king of Aremorica himself had sent reassurances to King Praswtag ap Ceinwyd of the Eceni, in full acknowledgement of all their impending activities in his neighbouring territories. Following ongoing royal council at each major stage of this rebellion, and with his brother Lludd's full support, Llefelys' messengers would continue to report back to that infamous, bull spirited monarch as to the irresistible and looming intentions of the *Aer y Derwydd* and to the progress of those unmatched sons of Beli Mawr who now led them.

All the *Corionototau* sworn werrin had donned their white gadfly badges with pride and had eagerly awaited that horn's unique yet unknown clarion call in their homes, in their crofts and in their thousands. The moment that deep and ominous blast reached them, releasing them and making the earth under their feet shake, they had exploded into synchronous action. King Afyn's troops who were stationed throughout these towns and villages were equally surprised at that terrifying sound which seemed to vibrate everything around them even the ground beneath their feet, as were those untrustworthy unfortunates who knew nothing of Llefelys' woolly insects. Their surprise was a fleeting thing however, as they were all dead a few moments later. The legally and spiritually *released* Corionototau flowed from their fraught communities

and into the broad plain of Fro Gwyn for their animated assembly, and the land around them came alive. Weeks later, visitors to these towns and villages would report that the astonishing sound had been heard over seventy miles away, but on this day of revolution, the Horn of Bran's terrible and prophetic resonance had not needed to travel far at all. Its effect had been dramatic however, as from their ecstatic assembly point, adorned with the white gadfly of Gwened and armed with the tools of their living, the Corionototau sworn werrin army had charged north with the ancient call of that legendary horn vibrating everything around them, even their teeth and their vision. With death in their hearts and vengeance shining bright in their eyes, the long repressed werrin of Coritana swept forth, hazarding their lives in a valiant and poverty driven attempt at reclaiming everything they had ever owned and everything they had ever been. Somehow, that old and deeply sacred horn had been activated atop CaerCorion for the first time in living memory, and it had freed these courageous people both religiously and physically. With bright steel in their fists and a colder gleam in their eyes, they flowed from their assembly point in their thousands. Still in family groups, this frantic people's militia then entered the great curve of afon Gwyn, which arches like a defensive bow below the brash ramparts of Afyn's stronghold; the hated CaerLindon, with its rearing viper flags adorning those high and daunting battlements in endless scorn and eternal disrespect. The euphoric werrin militia of the ancient and future Corieltau were finally able to take the fight to their tyrant King Afyn, and their courage was boundless. They attacked his despotic capital CaerLindon with a ferocity elevated beyond all thought and all reason, and each person was gripped by the unique, *Brythonic* kind of battle madness which consumes all. Whole families swept north together in arms toward that serpent bannered monstrosity across the river, as it had come to symbolise their long years of unflinching oppression and their everyday subjugation at the hands of its cruel inhabitants, and the utterly committed Corionototau were unstoppable. Afyn had made great use of that natural riverine defensive ditch, reinforcing the northern bank of the 'white river' with a

palisade, but the Corionototau would not be dissuaded nor would they be contained. As men, women and young teenagers fell everywhere around them, they stormed that great river ditch and smashed the riverside palisades apart. Clambering onto the northern bank amid thrashing shot and whistling arrows, the Corionototau emerged soaked but undeterred. They poured forward in waves then to breach the bristling inner ditches to Afyn's fortress, before then tearing down the gatehouse such was their ferocity. These brave werrin were so numerous and so possessed by Cornonnyn's rage, they slew all the defenders at this massive gatehouse and its overhead killing gantries, even as the bodies of their friends and families were piled up at the entrance around them. They stormed into the interior then in such numbers and in such a mindless collective fury, there was a crush at those deadly gates. Due to their stubborn and unswerving persistence and their overwhelming, vengeance filled blood lust, CaerLindon fell within the hour to this thoughtless and unstoppable werrin army. King Afyn and his Coritana gŵyrd fell back to their inner keep, but their retreat served them no purpose as the Corionototau were like a wild river in flood and could not be controlled. It must have seemed to those doomed aristocrats and their panicking people as if all Breged was arrayed against them this historic day. As the late western sky above was awash with the blooded clouds of a shepherd's warning, so too were the harrowed streets of CaerLindon below them awash now with the blood of its people. As the ever-symbolic black smoke of ruin began to billow from the caer's beleaguered ramparts, the screams from those within reached up to the slowly twinkling stars above, but there was no compassion in those distant and celestial witnesses. There was even less in these vengeful attackers this night, and so, under this indifferent blue luminosity, the resulting slaughter in this fortress became uncontainable. There followed all the dreadful things which befall the residents of a conquered caer, and the Gods must surely have averted their gazes at this point.

As the implacable Corionototau left that vanquished bastion in darkness, the rising flames behind them reflected red and hot on the wet gore which

was running down the ramp between the gates as if a bloody river had burst its banks inside that burning fortress. The riverside sprawl of town below and around that burning citadel was largely abandoned, as the werrin of Tref Lindon had retreated to the dubious security of the dun's walls at the first sign of this siege, and they had all perished within its deadly enclosure. Below CaerLindon and along all the approaches to the tref, the broken bodies of those who were too slow or chose to stay outside the fortress lay still where they fell, and the conjoined blood of its slaughtered townsfolk now sullied the waters of the white river, turning it red for miles downstream. All Breged would come to know that the rule of the hated King Afyn and his cruel Coritana had come to a desperate and bloody finale. As the garrulous and victorious Corionototau swept through the streets of the town below the blazing palisades, kicking in doors and looting everything that was not bolted to the floors, their long years of harsh and enforced austerity fired their avarice, and not one building was left untouched. The wealth these poor people discovered secreted away in the homes and businesses of these slaughtered Coritana residents gave them a resentful and a revealing insight as to where their own stolen prosperity had been kept for so long. Not one person hiding survived, be it adult or child and even the dogs and livestock were slaughtered in the madness, those which had not fled into the surrounding forest. The few broken unfortunates yet surviving could be seen sitting in the dust of their own litter strewn main road, staring aghast at the twin rivers of blood which ran down the gutters to either side of their *stryd fawr* and from their own glistening entrails. These red and congealing rivulets trickled thickly off this dusty road and on down to the white river, to where they joined and added to that great cloud of destruction washing down to sea. It seems finally that the years of oppression from these once all-powerful, unforgiving people were over, and that the werrin of Corieltaufi were now free to reclaim everything they had lost and everything they had once been.

A little over fifty miles north of that bloody siege and the total destruction of CaerLindon, General Cadallan led another party to CaerAhumyr; a secondary but pivotal fortress to these suddenly beleaguered Coritanau, and which lay just east of the afon Trysent in a fine bend of that northerly flowing river. It was where that tributary river met the estuary of the great Ahumyr itself, and it was that national boundary with Gabrantofica where the general took his men and women. It was a location which offered him control over the whole seaboard territory including the fortress commanding the aber of the Ahumyr, and taking possession of it was a strategic necessity. Expert bowmen from Seganta sent in advance brought down any incoming messenger pigeons, and so, the pendragon and his gŵyrd had penetrated the gatehouse of CaerAhumyr using the general's authority, group subterfuge and natural guile, but once the gates were opened in error, that caer was doomed. With a most devastating and skilful charge, Cadallan had stormed the defenders himself, leading the decisive attack alongside his much-feared warriors of the *leaping deer*, and within the hour the caer was his. There had been no unwarranted butchery in this fallen fortress as Cadallan was a professional, but the dungeons under this minor stronghold were now filled with its erstwhile guardians, those who had surrendered and chose to live. The Corieltaufi royalty had then sailed up the Ahumyr estuary and to the caer overlooking its throat, and its gŵyrd had then established itself there in the royal lodges of its inner keep, once all the bodies had been removed and the blood sluiced out. Vanquished CaerAhumyr now gave the renewed Corieltaufi aristocracy a secure base for their revolution, and with its water gates built adjacent to the wharves on the aber, it made a perfect resupply port. If all goes badly at CaerCorion however, this major river estuary would make a swift outlet for their escape, and all now awaited messengers from the south, or perhaps even the distant and unfamiliar call of an infamous war horn of old. These bold midland nobles expected good news in whatever form but wisely prepared for the worst, nonetheless.

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As the blood still trickled through the streets in Coritana to the distant south, on this main north-south road running through the heart of northern Breganta, and just after a glimmering, ominous dawn had broken, King Cartysman and his retreating forces were fatally ambushed. This fantastically cambered, stone edged, double-ditched and finely metaled road known as *Stryd Fawr Dyfnwal* was more than three centuries old, and it had been made famous again by the passing of the great northern triad last year. This superior highway had given Cartysman and his retreating army no advantage this ominous day however. With all Breged in flames behind him, young King Cartysman was forging north through Cwm Belenos along *Stryd Fawr Dyfnwal*, attempting to reach the safety of DunRheadr with his wife and all his army, but they were all brought to a crashing halt just one short mile from his caer.

Under huge and startling red dragon banners on the deepest of black backgrounds, the now *Black* Essyllwyr, driven to a battle seeking ecstasy by their druids' sacred *cychwyn* had flowed up and out from recently identified *calon* Prydein behind their blackened and now blessed shields. Screaming death, they fell on Cartysman's Bregantan army from the perceived 'heart' of this country, sweeping out of the mouth of Cwm Tÿs to the northwest of this main road, and these incensed Khumric killers tore into their left flank with an unbelievable ferocity. Although the infamous gŵyrd of Breganta were led now by a doomed king and most of them had known for some time that their days were numbered, they were proud Bregantan officers, nonetheless. They proved their valour and their loyalty this day and in the most courageous way, as none would yield. As the hammering, steely and mortal clash of battle exploded all around them, they fell back in a great circle of flashing blades around their young king and his teenage wife. All were big and seasoned warriors, armed with long and glittering Bregantan legends, and they made a daunting king's guard as they retreated slowly but steadily toward their dun. The dour and legendary force pouring into them and under those stark banners of doom

coldly informed them of their fate this forlorn day however, and their faces gave sight to this knowledge of their imminent and violent deaths.

The courage of King Cartysman's unbending and loyal gŵyrd will surely last the test of time, through the englyns of Cledwyn *Doeth* and all Prydein's honoured bards and storytellers. A *cyfranc* of the Eagle Gŵyrd's courage will be carried forward into Prydein's future by all her bards and by her master storytellers, as will the 'tale' of their *king for one summer's* reckless ambitions, and in the final analysis; his cowardice. In truth, the bards' and all future narrators' words will become as skewed and as biased as they ever do over time, but whatever protracted, glorious and daylong battle is sung or told by them in later years, the gŵyrd of Bregantau's frenzied defence of Cartysman and his new wife did not see the morning out. In fact, their determined, embattled but hopeless march toward the gates of their fortress did not even last an hour. A meagre mounted force had charged out of those gates to support their beleaguered monarch, his wife and all their lords, but the notorious *Black* *Essyllwyr* could not and would not be denied the total annihilation required of them this dark day, and they became utterly lost to their killing madness, destroying these newly arrived horsemen in a welter of accurately thrown spears. The slaughter became enormous and entirely one sided around the host on this wide road once these reinforcements had been wiped out, and none in this remaining army were spared. Two huge, royal bodyguards were the last to fall to this spiritually inspired wave of expert and determined Khumric mankillers, to reveal a pale and blood splashed Cartysman clutching the trembling shoulders of his young wife. No longer surrounded by the steel comfort of his gŵyrd, his nerve broke, and that disgraced young ruler fled toward his gatehouse, leaving a terrified Morwena standing there alone. She was splashed with the blood of her fallen protectors and stood rooted amid the butchery, pale, wide eyed and terrified and with her fingers crammed into her mouth. In her glittering and pebble like eyes gleamed her darkest fears made real, and she was trembling now from head to foot. A big shadow approached and

Morwena looked up, a scream erupting from her, but a long sword was pushed firmly into her open mouth silencing Morwena forever. Her spineless husband was brought down behind her in a flurry of black wool and chainmail, and he was slaughtered on the threshold of his own caer.

As Bel found his anterth high above, Cwm Belenos was strewn with the bodies of fallen warriors and awash with overwhelmingly Bregantan blood. The indomitable Essyllwyr were once again triumphant, and the air was torn by their battle horns and their lilting cries of victory as they performed their usual dance of death around the corpses at their feet. The same air, which just minutes later was sullied by the harsh cries of high and circling buzzards, which were languid in their lofty perusal of this latest meal as they had all the time in the world. The druids below them in contrast were ecstatic in their long white gowns, and with their glistening foreheads running with sweat, they babbled and spat on these drifts of bloody corpses around their bare and dancing, filthy feet. They leaped and hopped to their own victorious cadence of death around these dead and dying, more garrulous than the blood splattered Essyllwyr around them and the carrion birds above. 'The king for one summer'; Cartysman, his equally novice Queen Morwena and all their Bregantan officers and soldiers had been destroyed in this mindless slaughter by the priests of the motherland's soldiery. The sacred black hammer of the Khumry's priesthood had been driven to excess by their national orders, and not a soul had survived their oath-sworn ministrations. From his severed hand, Lludd Llaw Ereint himself prised Cartysman's bloody fingers apart to reclaim the long-lost treasure of his nation, and his blue eyes had glittered as he viewed the priceless, solid silver, dragon-capped and fabulous white rod of power for the first time. He felt its latent power vibrate briefly in his living fist, as unseen and unheard from here, Lord Fwlch flashed his congratulations across the blue skies of Khumry, and Arglwydd Taranu rolled his massive quern stones across the heavens of that far distant motherland in joint celebration.

Under orders and continuing in his sacred duties, Cartysman and Morwena's ravaged bodies were dragged from the mess by a grisly gŵyr, stripped naked by him and then chopped to pieces on the blood clotted grass with a huge axe to much cheering and wild applause from the resting ranks. They were left looking like a brace of butchered pigs on the ground, being utterly dishonoured and rendered incapable of passing over the bridge of swords and thus ever gaining the Underworld. Due to their sacrilegious and self-promoting deeds, Cartysman and Morwena's names will be permanently erased from the *Brut y Brenhinoedd a Tywysogion*; the royal lists kept by the druids of Prydain. Speaking their names will be forbidden, and they will pass from the memory of Brythons forever. The butchered chunks of their once aristocratic flesh would be left to rot in the sullied grass where they lay or left for some animal to carry away, no one cared. The remaining Bregantan bodies had been collected into one huge mound, and it was set alight in a dishonoured funeral pyre of shame at the head of this cwm, which would become marked in time with a great cairn of memorial stones. Lludd and his *Aer y Derwydd* then surrounded DunRheadr in their fiery fury, blood spattered, wild eyed and terrible, and the caer drew down its pennants and threw open its great gates in panic. King Lludd Llaw Ereint, high king of all Khumry and champion of the 'fire of the druids' demanded loudly that baby Bellicca be brought forth. A flurry of white linen appeared through the gates, and Lludd's demands were quickly met. Along with the infant's large retinue of nurses and carers, Princess Regent Bellicca ferch XXXXXXXXX ap Bellnor of Breganta was brought forward. Lludd surveyed the pink and wriggling contents of all that swaddling from his saddle but said nothing, nodding to his squires. Baby Bellicca was placed in the care of a distantly related niece of Bellnor's, and that infant princess with the unbelievable future was borne away to her seat at the capital CaerUswr. Finally, the werrin of Breged could all heave a great and collective sigh of relief as this civil war was brought to an abrupt, bloody but *noisy* close, as Bellicca's screaming could be heard from miles away.

During that furious battle, Beli Mawr's old but surviving druid Cledwyn *Doeth* had noted the wild spiritual beasts of *eagle*, *wolf* and *viper* struggle against the red dragons and the black pennants of the Essyllwyr, and he had been moved to lyrical inspiration by it. At battle's end, the poetic words he spoke to his bards described those unmatched red dragons of Khumry rising above those untamed, unnatural beasts of Breged with the strength and obvious blessings of their Gods, and the *Aer y Derwydd* had once again gained their victory. Committing his outpouring verse to these intensely engaged men around him, chipping away with their little *Coelbren* axes or scratching away on their wax tablets, Cledwyn eulogised that the Essyllwyr's black shields and their black, red dragon pennants had swelled gloriously upwards as they swamped the uncivilised beasts of the Bregantau. He had been inspired to poetic brilliance by the sanctified and holy *eilywed* he had just witnessed; a great and terrible 'shedding of blood'. Before these animated priests, the once proud XXXXXXXXX and his vainglorious wife XXXXXXXX looked like a couple of butchered piglets on the blood splattered turf and before their hopelessly outclassed and overpowered dun. Cledwyn had been delighted, gaining all the inspiration he needed for his final and greatest englyn, grinning broadly through his curly beard as the voices of his bards rose in harmonised brilliance to the heavens, and as his precise and rhythmical new words swelled gloriously all around him.

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More than a hundred miles south of King XXXXXXXXX's violent demise in northern Breged, King Iddel ap Madoc of the Cornafau Calon had led his host of the *war-horn* east and across his border. He had set out in the dark to complete his own sworn part in this midland civil war, bringing his celebrated army to the task and under their infamous banners.

CaerBwrdd sat sharp and high on its hilltop overlooking the vast market sprawl of Ratau below it, which is the Coritanau's primary trading hub. Ratau is the biggest defended marketplace in southern Breged and the

east midlands. *CaerLeir* as it was once known, long ago and when its reputation was still intact, was an immensely wealthy conurbation in an elite and much-envied royal region. More than seven hundred years ago, this used to be High King Leir's town and fortress overlooking a fine bend in the river Sara or the Sorgwm as some of these people now called it. It had been a fabulous, fantastic palace and citadel to the great man, but time changed everything. Time had played its part in allowing the cruel Coritana to come to power in the intervening centuries. Time had given them the opportunity to govern, to rule and to control these once golden territories before any alliance could be thrown together to oppose them. The Coritana's infinitely inferior rule from what had come before, especially under Afyn was what had allowed their cruellest men to rise to vaunted positions in these midland provinces; positions of dark power and of cynical authority. Their awful influence had completely changed these towns and villages over those same harsh generations, eventually even changing the nature of these once good and industrious people and for the worse. This had once been the stellar and high towered *CaerLeir*, standing proud on its hill with its palace buildings gleaming, and with the industrious, wealthy *Tref Lŷr* within a beautiful bend in the *afon Sara* below it, it had been a place of beauty and legend, overflowing with enterprise, fashion and culture. It was now the dirty and ramshackle *Tref Ratau* on the filthy river *Sorgwm* and overseen by the shabby *CaerBwrdd* sadly. The whole desolate place seemed overwhelmed by a sullen air of resignation and poverty. *Ratau's* enormous and littered market square, the acres of poorly maintained cattle stockades around it and the protective old hillfort overlooking it, all lay wreathed in this morning's mist which thankfully blessed it with the transient beauty of diaphanous concealment. What could be seen of the big but scruffy looking town from these trees looked calm, silent, and peaceful and not a soul could be seen moving on its veiled streets, but all that was about to change. *Iddel* had come for this dun's infamous warden leader; *Gŵyr Garoch ap Crasgwn Didostur*, and he had promised *Cadallan* his ugly head on a spike. It had taken *Iddel* and his mixed troops two days to travel the seventy-four miles

from CaerUricorn, down a part of the ancient but excellent Sarn Belenos, and then a night under canvas at Tref Dirwyn before the final miles to be here in Ratau this morning in readiness, and he and his host were fresh and eager for the coming action. A *cennadwr marchog* arrived at Iddel's rear lines in a flamboyant flourish, and this green clad messenger knight soon marched up the lines between these trees and passed on his news logically and succinctly to the king and his gŵyr at the van, before streaking off again to the rear and vanishing in a blur among these dense firs. Iddel nodded in satisfaction at the report as the rest of his army was now in place as demanded, and he made the expected signal to an awaiting cornwr. To the blare of some famous war horns and under some illustrious and familiar banners, three thousand warriors of the *tactful heart* rode, drove and marched forwards from all four approaches to CaerBwrđ, surrounding the whole town and the fortress at its heart in minutes. The werrin flooded over the Sorgwm bridge spanning their dirty river and fled to the entirely dubious sanctuary of the caer on the adjacent hill, but it would do them no good, not only as it was too small to hold all the people of this town, its feared leader and his best men were away raiding. Without the fear driven control of Garoch *Didostur* however, Leir's old citadel fell without one drop of blood being spilled, and CaerBwrđ's huge black gates were thrown open to Iddel without an arrow loosed. This dilapidated dun's warriors knew they were outnumbered and outclassed at first glance of Iddel's surrounding might, and with their oppressive dictator away on his murderous business, they were relieved perhaps that their daily ordeal in his service had finally come to an end. The werrin in Tref Ratau and all the traders and stall holders below the fort were ecstatic, and they were rushing about the long streets of their market town or up and down both banks of the river, dancing and celebrating their newly found freedom with a wild abandon. News of the *Corionototau's* successes further south and of the Black Essyllwyr's inevitable victory to the north swept this community, passed on by Iddel's outriders, and their celebrations increased. These people were suddenly faced with a quite different but welcome new future as Iddel's *war-horn*

banner was raised above the ancient keep on their once fantastic hilltop fortress and for the first time in its long and illustrious history.

Before he saw it for himself Garoch had feared the worst, as the news from his forward scouts had been drastic. If Iddel really had taken possession of his caer his life was in immediate danger as were all his men's, but he was no fool, and with all that had been in play in Bregeð recently, Garoch the merciless had made plans for this event, if and when it should ever happen. Within half an hour, Garoch had indeed seen it for himself. He watched the wild celebrations of his duplicitous and weak subjects from the concealment of this forest's fringe with a scowl, and it burned him. The *war-horn* banner now flying high above his distant lodges made him grimace, but what burned him the most was the chest of gold coins in his lodges which was now clearly lost to him. They were the savings of years, and with a snarling spit to the ground, Garoch led this deeply concerned warband back into these trees and away from his lost wealth, his lost stronghold and the position of a lifetime. He led his men east toward Ecenia, where he had friends and had been assured of their assistance should he ever need it. Mercenary by deed and by his foul nature, Garoch was pragmatic in his defeat and his reduction as he led his worried looking men back into this forest. He had lost everything before but had soon taken what he had needed to survive and to prosper in these wild regions by merciless and unflinching violence, and he would do so again. He was determined to continue in the way he had become accustomed, and Garoch was entirely comfortable with killing, stealing and taking anything which he desired with little mercy, no remorse, and no concept whatsoever of conscience. With this brigade of his highly trained and fearfully obedient men around him, and whilst still free to roam, he felt confident in his ability to do just that as he stole away into this forest.

Arglwydd Afon Wayland has always been the riverine border between warlike Ecenia and ferocious Coritana, named for Wayland ap Gofannon, the hugely creative and infamously limping smith who had transformed

Brythonic warfare with his inventive genius long ago. That Godlike, metalworking virtuoso was revered to this day, and will be, unto the end of days for his inspired discoveries in the field of warfare. As Garoch and his black clad warband approached this sacred boundary river named for that great man, he could see that the hills behind it were covered in a long line of fabulously decorated Ecenic chariots, not arrayed in welcome as expected but clearly barring the way. With a hateful scowl, Garoch realised that his agreement with them was worthless, and that the way to Ecenia was closed to him. Cadallan and Iddel must have been busy in the orchestration of their opposition and had anticipated this move. The only option left to him and his men now was to follow this snaking, glittering ribbon of the Wayland all the way to the ocean and to the broad and massive, *wash* like inlet to their east known as *Bae Cornonnyn*. There, they should be able to gain passage on one of the many traders plying the fishing villages all around that great rectangular bay, and Garoch would commandeer one or more of those vessels. Once in command of adequate transport he would ship north into Aber Ahumyr and to the caer at its narrowing neck, where he hoped to find the gŵyrd of Afyn's Coritanau and safety. Turning his back on the long row of ostentatious chariots commanding the southern skyline and the now lost sanctuary of Ecenia, Garoch led his warband along this rutted drover's road which followed the meandering course of the Wayland. The glittering Wayland always lay tight to their right flank as they headed ever east on this meandering riverside lane and toward the vast rectangular welcome of distant Cornonnyn Bay. They had only travelled a few miles when they came across the main north-south road and the *Corion* intersection. Crossing this broad main road and continuing along the minor drover's lane intersecting it, they headed downhill toward the Wayland's muddy estuary known as *Forge Ditch* and the glittering North Sea beyond that. As they rode and marched through this major crossroads they were brought up short, and by the arrival of a thumping but muted tempo of countless booted feet coming from the north. The pointed, silver tip of one very impressive flagpole then appeared over the top of the hill on this main

road to their left, and the noise of a marching army arrived with it, unseen yet by these fugitives, but overseen by the rising crossbar of that tall banner pole. As this infamous flag rose into view, Garoch's men came to a wordless halt without command on this crossroads, and their mouths fell open at the dread sight. A blood red, horn bristling, fire breathing and armour-plated monstrosity was concealed among the folds of that infamous flag rising ominously above that hill. The sea breeze flapped it open then, revealing the unholy red dragon at its heart in all its stark and terrifying glory. This was the chilling war banner of the legendary *Pendragon* of Prydain. This was the battle flag of the infinitely stubborn, prime warlord who had defeated Caesar himself in the last Roman war, and all these men knew the game was up. Somehow, General Cadallan ap Cadall of the resolute Carfetau had anticipated their flight to the coast through the Wayland valley and had managed in some way to confront them. More sounds of their encirclement could be heard all around them now, and Garoch's pale officers were dismayed and began to fidget in their saddles as there was no way out of this constrained river valley. Their worst fears had come true; in that their murderous and duplicitous leader had got them all killed, as they had all known one day that he would, and it showed now on their bone white and drawn faces. These men were no cowards however, and each man knew they had been committed to their dark and ugly chieftain since the first bloody and unlawful deed they had carried out for him. They all had benefitted one way or another from the pitiless, mercenary work they had done in Gŵyr Garoch ap Crasgwn's immoral service. It seemed they were about to pay for that dissolute duty now and in the most final and brutal way, but they drew their uncommon swords together nonetheless and gathered around their vicious leader. As the black Coritana shuffled into a defensive formation tight along this infamous riverbank, the vanguard of Cadallan's army finally crested the hill, and their war horns and their jubilant warcries shattered the sky. By canny deed and superb timing, the Carfetau's legendary *warriors of the deer* had penned this rogue, black viper brigade against the Wayland's deep and fast running boundary, and

Cadallan himself led the attack. He charged downhill toward this sacred river on his white stallion, looking magnificent in his gleaming helm and his shining breast plate with the flash of bright copper leaping across it. In this peerless warlord's wake, the ferocious and professional soldiers of his *leaping-deer* brigades swamped the black force milling about before the Wayland in moments, and the slaughter was swift and without compromise, as these mercenary men were all destined for an unmarked and communal pyre of shared shame. Garoch's murderous men were vastly outnumbered and had their backs against this river, but they fought on furiously and bravely in their own defence, nonetheless. These men were no spiritually inspired *unit* and did not fight as one, and so they were soon destroyed by Cadallan's incensed warfare elites. As swirling rafts of black-swathed, torn, and bloodied bodies nudged each other for space in the sacred waters of the Wayland, their downriver race to the ocean began, and so, this battle and the regional control of these murderous men had come to a violent and bloody end. The hideous head of Garoch *Hyll* was handed to Cadallan at battle's end by one of his grinning and blood splattered gŵyr, and the general growled his pleasure. Holding it up in his fist by a hank of its black and greasy hair, he stared into the glazed eyes with a grimace and as the warm blood dripped from the torn flesh of his ragged neck to run down Cadallan's forearm.

"You really were an ugly pig Garoch, and I should have done this years ago!" The general snarled, and he threw the severed head to a novice squire. "Bag it lad, as there are some very important people who want to put eyes upon it, and then secure it in my baggage." Cadallan told the horrified young *macwy* with a wink. Catching it neatly, this young man in the ubiquitous green tabard of his position bowed to his king and marched stiffly off to his duty with his eyes wide, holding the blood dripping head away from him in disgust between finger and thumb and by its filthy hair. Within minutes, General Cadallan had things snapping along in his usual fashion, and as the flames licked up the oil doused mound of looted and blade torn bodies, the warriors of the leaping deer departed with many spare weapons and horses. The looted weapons, armour and trinkets he

would let his foot soldiers keep, but the horses were of an excellent Coritana bloodline and they will be divided among his officers later. These victorious Carfetau marched back up the main northern road to another big intersection just a few miles away where they would wheel westward to Iddel the generous' CaerUricorn, back along that stretch of the very late High King Dyfnwal Fawr and his son Belenos Hên's amazing road network known as *Sarn Belenos*. These blood-spattered soldiers marched with a lively step up this superb road as they had been informed that there was a great celebration awaiting them all at CaerUricorn. There would be gallons of free ale and mead, and a vast banquet had been prepared for them there by all accounts, and so, as they marched back uphill they were grinning to a man and to a woman. The faster cadence of their booted feet reflected their hunger and their thirst for the refreshments and the merriment to come. Their mounted officer's grins were similarly broad across their equally blood streaked faces, and they had to encourage their horses into a trot just to keep up with their suddenly energetic troops.

Now, the renewed and reinstated Corieltaufi along with their Corionototau militia have finally succeeded in remaking the ancient alliance and have together defeated their oppressors. The Corieltaufi will retake authority of these lands after so many years and so much hardship. Once again, those honourable artisans will govern all southern Breged and force the survivors of the brutal but now throneless Coritanau back into vassal status. It was their turn now; it was for the brutal Coritanau to flee for their lives now and to hide in some dark and unknown corner. The glorious and deeply honoured Corionototau disbanded quickly as they had a harvest to bring in and countless other chores and duties to attend to, some being most urgent. So, the brave people's militia of Corieltafora *Newydd* dispersed and returned home to their thatches in triumph, to count their losses and to honour their dead, to lick their wounds and to prepare themselves for the backbreaking and endless work to come. As Cadallan had declared himself morally and culturally exempt, the Cornafau Calon, under the honest kingship of Iddel ap Madoc have now become the military power of the federation, the *rheolwr y grym* coming

into their possession without a throne challenge for the first time in Breged's history. The druids in their wisdom decreed that the requirements had been met in the war, and so Iddel became the confirmed ruler of this new and unburdened federation. Much approbation and thankful praise had been received from the druidry of Khumry, as the potential spiritual and religious catastrophe to their mother country and all Prydein had been resolved by the conclusion of this midland civil war. It was the return of their ancient, dragon capped white rod of immense and proven power to the fractious Druids of this country which had finally ended all hostilities. The sacred Beltain hearths of all Khumry had been secured forever by the actions of these all-powerful sons of Beli Mawr, and Prydein's tortured heart can now rest in peace once more. ✚

The principled Corieltaufi aristocracy can now concentrate their efforts on the governance of their vast southern territory to Iddel's east, and the late King Afyn's CaerCorion of the conquered Coritana becomes their CaerElsaforde again. Perhaps their golden age of artistic creation will now re-emerge, and the much-needed wealth from their greatly missed, jewel like artefacts will return to these beleaguered territories, now the honourable Corieltaufi rule and Coritana becomes *New* Corieltafora. With Bel working his seasonal magic high above, the werrin of Corieltafora *Newydd* are hard pressed as their first harvest is upon them. This year's harvest is clearly going to be a bountiful one, and every soul in these reprieved midland territories is working hard to clear away the debris of war and to rebuild and remobilise their capital, their shattered towns and villages and their abandoned farms in preparation for this pivotal event. All here know too that at least ten percent of their hard-earned finished grain will be heading south to war torn Caint, Casufelawny and Trinobanta once winnowed, cleaned and bagged, as their needs must be pressing in this time of great crisis. Whatever transpires on the southern coast in the coming weeks, the remaining werrin of war torn Lloegr and their hungry children are going to need food.

ŧ Associated and contemporary text published in Iron Blood & Sacrifice (Lludd & Llefelys); a novella set in the year between the Roman wars and available on Kindle/Amazon for 99p or less. This heroic tale of Lludd and Llefelys occurred concurrently with the midland civil war depicted in this book, and I have expanded on this in my novella. This truly ancient tale enshrined in the mabinogi describes how this mythical *triad* of problems afflicting Prydein was eventually overcome by King Lludd with the aid of his brother Llefelys and through a combination of heroic valour and magical cunning. This novella; Lludd & Llefelys also includes a 78-page historical supplement to all these books.



Chapter Nineteen.

Dawn was just minutes away now and King Guerthaeth kissed his new and gleaming bronze talisman which was hung around his neck on a black leather thong. A sacred symbol of newfound unity, this newly cast pendant was a gift from his equally novice wife, and it took the form of two birds' heads encapsulating the tapering, triple lane symbol of Prydein's druids. To one side of this finely cast bronze armorial was the *raven's-head* of Gangania, this staring across at the conjoined head of the *mountain-eagle* of the Decawangly tribe, and together they represented the joining of the two major tribes in Gogledd Khumry. These two powerful extended families had been merged into one new and hopeful kingdom by this impressive man, and which Guerthaeth had named Fenedotia-Gwen for his grandmother. This diminutive but infamous man now ruled both the kingdoms of Decawangly and Gangania, encompassing many miles of the coast of Gogledd Khumry, Gangania and of course Môn; honourable mother to the mother country herself.

Being the pride of this short but stocky king and the pride of all northern Khumry, these doughty men and women had travelled far. Walking more than three hundred miles to hazard their lives here in this war in Lloegr, they had done this from an unflinching sense of duty, and with their sword-sworn blood oaths to their Gods overpowering all else. Their honour and the honour of their new king and his fledgling monarchy was at stake here on this tense, nascent morning.

Guerthaeth's six hundred stout Khumric warriors grinned broadly in the weakening gloom of this new morning, their white smiles becoming clearer in the vague glimmer of this predawn, confirming what this fraught and fleeting period had become recognised as throughout Prydein. This portentous moment before the onset of battle was always known as *pwys*

ddant; the 'time of the teeth'. Before dawn *proper* and when the whiteness of the Brythons' ever grinning teeth was *just* discernible it was the time for attack, as it always has been. Alongside these grinning killers this early morning, the four rulers of Caint commanded this bold assault as it was their kingdom which had been invaded once more. Ruling King Cyngetoric of CaerCant had brought a reformed King Carvillios from CaerDorbruff with him, here to this conquered beach. The massively built King Tachumagalo from CaerLeman and his notorious neighbour King Segofach from CaerMedwas had journeyed with them to this besieged coast, and all their allied spearmen and women had been deployed along the fringes, overlooking this long beach and the foul Roman scar upon it. So, beleaguered Caint was arrayed at the head of this allied assault force under their striking trident banners, yet they remained well hidden under these trees at forest's edge until the prescribed moment, dictated as always by the priesthood of this island country of kingdoms. This noble South Lloegrian vanguard stood concealed and ready, just thirty *reeds* from these visiting northern Khumry, who were all crouched at the fringes of this same great forest under their own eye-catching flags. A reedy note from a druid's stag horn came warbling from the rear lines, somewhere deep in these trees behind them, and it confirmed Guerthaeth's wise patience. He grunted to his Pencampwr Tirion Mawr, and with a nod from this grisly champion, the courageous men and women of Fenedotia-Gwen rose up to play their part in this impending battle.

To the strange, rushing sound of thousands of feet on soft sand, the Khumric 'six hundred' broke this treeline, as did the warriors of many other Prydeinig tribes around them. Daubed with soot and running silently crouched over, these merged Brythonic tribes charged at the monstrous stockade on the beach before them which was high and daunting, and which surrounded the Roman's vast fleet of ships within. These wide-eyed and panting Brythons knew the game in play as they all played *bones*. The elite players among these breathless warriors rushing across this sand to their fate knew, that to succeed at the highest level of bones sacrifices were commonly required. Intensely aware that almost a hundred miles

north of here their king was employing one of the oldest gambits known in the game, these warriors were totally committed to the same. Caswallawn was unleashing the late King Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr's infamous coup-de-grace and his devastating undoer on the board of bones and of life, his legendary *aer y synod* tactic. These brave people had come here from all points of this great country to risk their lives in fighting these profane invaders, and knowing they were the hot tip of one of its flames, they were proud to play their part in Caswallawn's 'fire of surprise' manoeuvre.

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"Have a care or I'll feed your guts to my dogs!" Pompey roared out, as the statue of Venus Victrix which had been so expensive to commission by him swayed alarmingly on the leather straps. The burly men operating the A-frame hoist paled as one of the thick hide slings slipped, but it held, and they held their breath as they continued to lower this enormous and heavy statue infinitely carefully, until the base touched the concrete floor of this new temple with a soft and lifesaving *thud*. This large and domed temple to Venus sat at the back of the whole dizzying, stone-built edifice Pompey had built, sitting square atop this huge, sloping structure and overlooking a vast and curving concrete layout which was harsh to the eye in this blazing sunlight. The semi-circular concrete, or *opus caementicium* levels stepping down from this temple supported thousands of seats, all laid out in rows and aisles, facing away from Venus and down toward an enormous and distant stage. These vaguely pink caementicium flights were faced with dressed stone, and the interior of the temple overlooking them and all the apartments below were decorated by stucco, fresco painting and coloured marble, all of which formed *Theatrum Pompeii* as the Consul had privately named this vast structure. Regardless of the ambitious and contentious title, his new community centre here on the Field of Mars had become known to the masses as simply the 'Mars Complex'. This whole precinct had been inspired by Pompey's visit eight years previously to a Greek theatre in Mytilene, and this inspired *Roman*

interpretation would be this city's first permanent theatre if he pulled it off. It meant a great deal to the Consul to get it right as more than his reputation was on the line. This almost finished temple was the crowning glory to an enormous and architecturally challenging series of buildings built around this vast theatre, which when completed would allow the sheltered and *entertained* assembly of a great many people, most of them being his friends, allies and future patrons. Pompey's Mars Complex was a uniquely designed and self-contained commercial centre on the Campus Martius. It was complete with rows of shops and a variety of supporting service industries, and most of their associated businesses and suppliers had already given their commitments. Fragrant and manicured gardens were being installed where the nobility and these business owners could relax in the shade and refresh themselves along with their wealthy friends, and Pompey had invested a great deal of his wealth in their preparation. This high temple to Venus Victrix, however, would be the showpiece of this main *theatre* building, and the foundation of its spectacular deity was at this precise moment the entire focus of Pompey's attention, making an excellent distraction from his more private concerns and stresses. This larger-than-life sized statue was one of the last parts of this towering temple to be put in place, and this fabulous figure of Venus in Victory not only *allowed* this theatre like centrepiece to have been built, but it would also be the glorious and eye-catching crown to the whole site. This Goddess connected Pompey to Aeneas her son who was one of Rome's most beloved ancestors, and Pompey craved to be thought of in the same way. Large salons lay off that huge and vividly painted theatre-like structure below, and to where the statuary, paintings, and all the captured personal wealth of foreign kings and rulers from his past campaigns would be proudly put on display, once the gaudy wall paint had dried. These fabulously decorated salons and fountained, perfumed gardens once finished will be swarming with servants and slaves, and so all Pompey's architectural artistry could then be admired and enjoyed at leisure by his patrons, and together, they would offer Pompey a fine arena for his networking and his political machinations. Opposite the vast,

currently brown gardens below, Pompey had established a *curia* for his political rallies, and as a number of temples and halls had been included in the design, he hoped that it would satisfy the requirements for the Senate's formal meetings, and they would begin to use it one day. If they did patronise that curia and this centre as a whole, it would boost his profits massively, recouping some of the eye-watering investment thus far. This high Venus temple, founded above a spacious atrium and overlooking the whole theatre would make a fine place to address his supporters from, but for now, its finalisation took Pompey's mind off his domestic worries and his mounting personal concerns. His beloved wife Julia was in the final stages of childbirth, and although they were as confusing and as conflicting as ever, Pompey had been deeply concerned by the auguries. A messenger on a fast horse waited at his villa on the Alban Hills in Latium, which is almost sixteen miles from this campus at the city's walls and being more than an hour's ride away on really fast horses, it worried him. There was a huge trade caravan expected today, bringing much-needed grain into the city and to the storage depots along the Via Della Salara. It would probably arrive sometime this afternoon, and Pompey needed to be there to oversee the whole affair. Those sprawling grain depots had been established at the foot of the valley between the *Mont Palatino* and the *Mont Aventina*, and those massive pits had all been excavated tight to the Tiber's eastern bank for the cool ground. As a matter of duty, Pompey had to be there to govern the procedure, mostly to make sure the grain all got safely stored, but also to ensure there was no repeat of the thefts which had caused so much dissent among the citizens of this city over recent years.

The *Cura Annonae*; the 'care of the Goddess Annona' represented to the people of Rome an almost sacred and often lifesaving grain dole, which was always distributed from the nearby Temple of Ceres atop the Aventine Hill. From where you can look down on to the Tiber, the long row of state grain stores alongside it and the large avenue of warehouses leading to it, all belonging to the elites of this city and all known

collectively as *horrea*. Regular and authorised distribution of this vital and imported foodstuff began sixty-eight years previously following extended famine. The 'grain law' proposed by one Gaius Gracchus in response to the resulting starvation of Rome's citizens had readily been approved by the Roman popular assembly. In recent years and due to their conquests of Egypt and the garden of Europe; Gaul, grain was free to all Roman citizens over the age of fourteen. However, there were recent rumours in these restless streets that the ruthless Caesar had plans to change the Cura Annonae in some way on his return from Pritania or to reduce the number of its recipients in some unforeseen manner, and it was a concern to the ordinary working Romans in this huge city; the plebeian masses. Ceres was *their* Goddess, and from the fluted marble columns of her ornate temple, her adoring plebs can look down from their dole queue, across to the temple of Vesta and down to the huge oval of Rome's Circus Maximus, where the chariots would charge around at weekends and a fortune would change hands among the wealthy elites. The ornate and much-worshipped Temple to Ceres faced the Palatine Hill too from its hilltop crown, and at the far end of the Circus below and just short of the glittering Tiber lay the long row of underground storage depots which supplied that temple's lifesaving endeavours. Buried beneath the city's streets and tight to that curving and glittering ribbon of water, some citizens believed they could access *Mundus Cerialus*, or the 'World of Ceres' through the rear of the largest of these pits. The most ancient of those was thought by them to go back to the time of Romulus himself. That enormous and venerated cavern was opened three times each year to the plebians to allow a wild and alcohol-fuelled, ritual connection between themselves and their Goddess of the Underworld. Those mindless and celebrating worshippers believed that the spirits of their dead could exit *Mundus Cerialus* there, the largest of those vast clay pits and to then return to the living world to visit them. Offerings of grain were thrown into a deep and black hole at the back of that vast clay pit and at the denouement of these drunken celebrations, so that they reached Ceres in her Underworld to honour her and to nourish her. These huge

state storage pits alongside the Tiber would be Pompey's place of duty for this afternoon and for the near future. Demanding the position of *Curator Annonae* to supervise the importation, the storage and the ongoing security of Rome's grain may have secured him the time in the city to be here for Julia's childbirth, but he was neglecting the governorship of Hispania Ulterior no less to administer what in reality was no more than a clerk's job in a civil department. Food for this vast city's people was vital however, and so Pompey, with one eye fixed permanently on his popularity declared that he would manage the problem himself and that no Roman would go hungry this winter. Now he oversaw the securing of the thousands of tons of grain this city would need for the coming winter months, he had to justify his position with his attendance at the very least, but first he would make sure that Venus Victrix sat safely on her plinth and in the correct position.

Turning in his saddle and looking back at the bright marble columns, the domed porticos and the extended, red tiled buildings of his Mars Complex, Pompey was filled with pride. There was a crowd in the streets around the steps to the big colonnaded entrance to the complex today as there was every day lately, all awaiting details of the opening night. The precise date for this hotly anticipated event was still up in the air, as were its legalities, but news of his new *theatre's* contentious grand opening had been the hottest topic in the city this summer. Steering the horse with his knees, Pompey headed away from his personal new citadel and down this cobbled street, heading toward the distant glint of the busy river below and the Via Fiumara running alongside it, and with his dozen horse guards trailing easily in the building afternoon heat, he was deep in thought. Heading downhill, they made for the huge and distant underground grain stores to the south of this boisterous city, riding absently through these colourful and noisy streets, filled to capacity with competing vendors and wildly disparate looking but equally canny buyers from across this region. Negotiating the muddy bankside road and with the Tiber Island and its bridges rising ahead of him, Pompey absently considered the vociferous

lobbying of Cato and others, all baying for him to return to Gaul and to put down the suspected rebellion building there in Caesar's absence, but he had resisted so far. A growing threat to Roman rule in Gaul frustrated both him and Crassus alike, fuelling the demand for one of them to go there and to resolve the situation before it really begins and before it inevitably spirals out of control, and before the risk of Rome losing all that she has gained in that continent is realised. Crassus had recently left for Parthia and was currently crossing Anatolia below the Black Sea from latest reports, marching south through Armenia and intent on traversing the Alburz Mountains. He would then descend to the ever-hostile lands of the Parthians and to the great battle awaiting him there, so, Crassus was about as far away from Gaul as one could get. Caesar's five year 'Grant of Imperium' in Gaul was due to expire shortly and it could throw the balance of power in their triumvirate off kilter, exacerbating tensions between them if nothing was done, and Pompey knew Gaul would descend into a bloody nightmare of insurrection without the firm and controlling grip of continuing Roman authority. Caesar was still pursuing some Prittanic tribal king known as Cassivellaunus across that wild and profitless country as their invaluable gains in Gaul rotted away through his absence and his criminal lack of governance. By the latest reports, this barbarian Cassivellaunus' successes had emboldened the Gaulish tribes in Caesar's absence to rally around the equally barbarous Eburones in rebellion, becoming a suppurating sore in Rome's side on that continent, and neglected without treatment it could prove fatal to all their impressive conquests and their huge gains there. Gaul was not just a vast tract of vassal territory merely adding geography to the pink map of Rome's empire, as when properly governed it was a producer of huge wealth. It could be again, for any ruler powerful enough to keep the manic barbarian tribes subdued long enough to prevent them from assembling once more in warlike protest, or from slaughtering each other over some intractable and unfathomable dispute. However, he was gratified that no serious, *organised* rebellion had yet erupted in Gaul to force his hand. Pompey's thoughts were rudely interrupted as he approached the northern head of

the huge Circus Maximus complex and the busy row of grain depots awaiting him beyond, and by the frantic arrival of an urgent messenger. This breathless rider arrived on a horse which was clearly on its last legs and was slicked in foam, but he had been sent to recall Pompey in all haste as Julia had entered the final stages of labour, and this news galvanised the general into furious action. With all thought of his neglected post in Hispania, Caesar's Pritanic invasion and this afternoon's grain securing duties gone in an instant, Pompey turned his horse and spurred it cruelly. Without a backward glance and not waiting one heartbeat for his mounted guard, the pale and ruffled looking Consul made a mad dash back to his villa and to his suffering wife.

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Llefelys, Gwerdded and all their officers surveyed the huge Roman fortress in the distance with grim expressions, as it was now enormous and extremely well built. It lay in a vast bow of the fair paced river Mosa which ran behind this wooded hill concealing these thoughtful men and women before sweeping east and past that ugly, alien fortress. The Mosa then wound its way around the eastern fringes of these lands of the Eburones and flowed onwards to the coast and its great and distant estuary. The tall and gleaming palisade around that rebuilt and massively enlarged garrison was still raw with its extended newness, and it had drawn these grim monarchs and their elite warriors here this fateful day. The small fort which had existed here for over three years following the wars had been extended and fortified greatly this year to more than three times its previous size, and it now housed *a//* the 14th Legion and five cohorts of its auxiliaries. The crushing weight of Roman occupation in this war torn and beleaguered region had grown alarmingly of late along with this sprawling military base before them in the distance. Whilst Caswallawn was fighting Caesar tooth and nail in Trinobanta, these two Brythonic kings had come here to bolster their embattled family member's war tactics by crossing the channel and undermining the absent Caesar's governance, here in Gallia. Their mission this day would

add to the pressure on the Roman general to break off his conquest of Prydein, and it would compel him to return here to Gallia to where a growing rebellion was awaiting him if all went to plan.

Although seven centuries had passed since its winning inception, High King Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr's infamous, ancient, and devastating *aer y synod* bone game gambit was a two-pronged attack, and it always had been. Another of Cuneglas' noble descendants; Lludd Llaw Ereint had sowed the seeds of this coming rebellion in the spring, and together these two Prydeinig sibling kings had lobbied hard for it to commence this summer in support of their besieged family member and all southern Prydein, but the Gallic tribes had refused. Fearing the increased presence and the martial brilliance of Rome's infamous and recently bolstered 14th Legion here and its fearsome response to any challenge, they needed the security of far greater numbers before they would attack this burgeoning fortress, and they constantly claimed that they were not ready. Deploring this failure on their part to raise an allied Galliad revolt early enough to support Lludd and his other *Ewythr* Caswallawn, King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw of the Northern Gorddoficau had felt it his duty to cross the channel, join his other famous *uncle*; Llefelys ap Beli Mawr, and together, as their ancestors had always done they would lead by example this historic day. This new fortress would be under siege before the snows returned, of that, both these noble Brythonic warriors were sure, but that would be too late for their beleaguered relative across the channel. They were not here to conquer that Roman edifice, far from it, they were here merely to cause chaos and to convince these Romans that the rumoured rebellion was heating up and apparent. Almost half of the 14th Legion was absent from that distant fortress as they were out foraging among the broad inland pastures and woodlands to the south, but they were expected back this hour. Long scouts brought constant updates to these two Brythonic kings on the crown of this wooded hill, with constant progress reports of the Romans' progress and their whereabouts. There were almost three thousand men heading this way as they returned

wearily to their newly rebuilt stronghold after an extended day of hunting and scavenging, and they would soon be traversing this shallow valley below them.

Not only had the white dragons of Gwened and the red dragons of the Essyllwyr come together here today to do battle against these Romans from a sense of patriotic duty and a fierce sense of pride, but it was what they lived to do. It was clear by their expressions that they were overjoyed at the opportunity to do what they loved to do; kill their enemy whatever the colour of their banners but being Roman undeniably added spice to the pot. They also regarded themselves in this coming action as an 'overseas wing' of Caswallawn's bold *aer y synod* ploy. Swelling Ambiorix' war chest with much Prydeinig gold for the forthcoming rebellion was another strong motive, and those gold coins had been well-received. The *greater* revolution Ambiorix was preparing would involve most of the fractured, remaining tribes in a bold and hopefully decisive assault on their imperial enemy. This reformed Galliad alliance will attack Caesar and his returning troops this coming winter en-masse, forcing him to flee southeast over Cisalpine Gallia and home to Italy, and that will not come cheap in either lives or metal. The notorious Treveri chieftain Indutio-Marw had been nominated commander of the combined Gallic rebellion, which he struggled to coalesce into one fighting force from his fortress, high above the river Mosella in eastern Celtica. It was Indutio-Marw who had authorised Ambiorix as his sub-commander to raise the *Belgic* Galliad for the upcoming insurgency, and who it was ultimately who had given the go ahead for this *Brythonic* attack. Another fifteen hundred Galliad volunteers made up the balance of this ambushade, and apart from the element of surprise, these opposing enemy forces will be evenly matched. Llefelys and Gwerdded's allied warriors would have looked remarkable in their contrasting white and red and black and red plaid mantles had they not all been dressed in dark brown clothing for this battle, just like their other Galliad allies. Llefelys' *white-dragon* banner made up for it however, snaking among the folds of the Essyllwyr's

crimson counterparts, and the black, star-spangled banner of Gwerdded's sacred Gorddoficau among them added its gravitas to this unfolding event. King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw had brought over a thousand indomitable men and women here from Khumry to fight these Romans, and half were his tough Gorddofican mountaineers from Eryri, whilst the other half were Lludd's Essyllwyr elites from Khumry Calon and Khumry Dde. Llefelys had brought a similar number of eager warriors of Gwened from the Aremorican coast, all in support of Caswallawn's optimistic and two-pronged game of bones gambit across the channel, and his notorious Gwenyllon were poised and ready to play their part.

Along with his valiant Khumry, Gwerdded had brought with him from his first cousin King Lleu ap Rianaw in Wenyllon the reforged blade of King Leir ap Bladud Fawr, an ancient progenitor to them all, and *Teryll-arial*; his sundered sword was legend. Leir's sword had been shattered almost eight centuries ago and by his own daughter Goronilla in a ferocious political battle. This inter-family conflict for power and control of all Khumry and Albion was a notorious part of Prydein's ancient history, and the bards have worn the lyrics thin over the generations in their florid descriptions of that ancient but terrible conflagration, one which had set all Prydein and Gallia alight. This was especially so in Llefelys' Gwened, where the battles between aged father and two of his emboldened daughters had raged. Goronilla may have ruined Leir's blade 'Piercing-spirit' that day when she and her equally noble sister Riganna had infamously gone to war against their own father, but the king and his more loyal daughter Cordaella were victorious that day and had defeated the combined forces of both his other unruly offspring. Almost eight centuries previously, Goronilla and Riganna had laid claims on Albion and Khumry respectively when their father had withdrawn from courtly life in his middle-age. They had overstepped their authority in ousting their rightful sister Cordaella however, who was not only the rightful heir to all Leir's vast tracts of territory here in Prydein but a Galliad Queen in her own right. This bold and avaricious flouting of Leir's authority had brought him out of semi-

retirement and back into his war gear once more, as being Brythonic women through and through, he knew his fierce daughters would not back down. Joining Cordaella and her Galliad husband in Gwened, King Leir, King Aganippus and his Queen Cordaella went on to vanquish those two vainglorious women and both their armies, sending the two defeated sisters into ignominious exile from where they were never heard from again, but it was not achieved without a measure of personal loss to King Leir. Although physically uninjured in the decisive melee that day, his heart and his precious sword had been broken, and that great man had relocated north to grieve once back in Prydein and was not seen in public again from that day. Leir's shattered sword had been priceless and an heirloom of untold even Godly significance, handed down from generation to generation from its first owner and its vaunted commissioner; King Aineías. The venerable Aineías was the glorious issue of King Anchises of Troy and the Goddess Aphrodite, and so *Teryll-arial's* connection to their panoply of deities was undoubted. Leir's marvellous Trojan blade, although shattered into four pieces by his unruly daughter, it became over the interceding generations a fundamental icon to both the Gwened and the Khumry. These two proud nations are from the same bloodstock, that of of Beli Mawr, the great Cuneglas, his legendary grandfather Leir and of course Brutus himself. Leir's issue; one or more of the remaining *red dragons* of Prydein would, once a year without fail and on the anniversary of their ancestor's pivotal victory carry the two parts of the fabulous but broken 'Piercing-spirit' back to Llefelys' capital fortress in great celebration. This they would do religiously each year and in honour of King Leir ap Bladud Fawr, who perished in the year 3147 since the creation of this earth. It had been no surprise to anyone when Arfon Mawr, the preeminent master sword maker of Prydein had been commissioned to reforge this famous sword by the young but imperious Gorddofican monarch. Gwerdded had charged that great man to remake it into its pristine and singularly deadly, previous condition. King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw had presented this reformed and reforged sword to his regal

uncle King Llefelys in all honour and much ceremonial rite on arrival, and the king of Gwened had been delighted by it.

On this forested hilltop, Leir's fantastically repaired sword now shone with a terrible and malevolent promise in Llefelys' fist, and this fierce *white dragon* waited eagerly to use it. In fact, Llefelys could not wait to wield it in battle to the eternal honour of his venerated ancestors, and he burned to witness the blade commissioned by Anchises and Aphrodite for their amazing progeny sing again in battle. Their bold son Aineías and eventually his descendant Leir had reaped the souls of their enemy with its deadly beauty, and it had been kept and revered for eight hundred long years since. In honour of this glorious and deeply sacred event, Leir's infamous banner had also been recreated, and its stark symbolism was not lost on any of these warriors waiting below it as it meant no prisoners! Leir's blood curdling, flame formed and crimson pennant had been known throughout their history as '*pennon y gwaed didostur*'. This unadorned, long and narrow, bright red military flag was only brought out in the direst of circumstances, meaning nothing less than the 'banner of merciless blood'. Long and triangular, this crimson military standard tapered to a ragged tip and it represented nothing less than a flag of unflinching vengeance. It was only carried by those ancient men of Prydein for the most calamitous of occasions; dire times when pride and honour had meant more than life itself. Its glorious reappearance here today added to the importance and to the sanctity of this battle to come, and its blood red and ragged folds snaked in the breeze among the leafy branches overhead, informing all these waiting men below it what was required of them this critical day. Llefelys had decided to fly Leir's long and almost forgotten banner of merciless blood for this provocative ambush, as Julius Caesar thought himself the bringer of total and all-out war. The king of Gwened was determined to introduce these Romans to the ancient, *Brythonic* type of total war this portentous day. Long evolved here from the superb Trojan warfare of old, every man and woman gathered around

this Gwenedian monarch and below his crimson flag were sworn to its stark and sinuous demands.

Gwerdded looked stunning in his beautifully embossed, Gorddofican plate armour this late evening, being completely different to Llefelys' more continental style of gleaming white, fishplate armour in the *Camlann* style, but which was no less effective for its intricacy. Llefelys' eyes shone brighter than his spectacular armour today, and Gwerdded's regal *ewythr* and one of Beli Mawr's ferocious dragons looked as fierce as his late father with his bone-white and domed helmet standing out from the crowd of officers around them both. With the tension of imminent battle drawing his face, Llefelys reminded Gwerdded of his late father Nynniaw at that moment and when the dragon's light was lit deep in those oh-so familiar blue eyes, and he was comforted by it. With their ranks vanishing into the trees behind them, this dual Brythonic gŵyrd was drawn up on, and behind this hill overlooking the ancient drover's road below them, and the tension was building steadily in them all. That dusty lane below them had coiled its pretty way through the mature trees of this shallow green valley and alongside the Mosa, around this forested hill and all the way to the blue of the distant coast, long before that angular palisaded Roman scar on this sacred Galliad land had even been sketched out in the dirt. The birds in the forests to either side of this road below fell abruptly silent as the peaceful atmosphere in this whole vale suddenly changed, lurching menacingly toward the tense and the fraught. Pulses were raised now at the hurried approach of all three of their long scouts, as it could only mean one thing. Looking west and down through these dense firs, Llefelys and Gwerdded could just make out the distant but voluminous column of dust which followed the Roman army everywhere it went when the weather was dry, and it marked them well. It also announced their approximate arrival at this ambush point below, and the white teeth of these Brython's and their Galliad cousins broke out in earnest all around them.

Iron Blood & Sacrifice (Return of the Yellow Dog).
Eifion Wyn Williams

Sounds of crunching feet, clanking armour and the rattling of thousands of marching men finally reached these waiting Brythonic and Galliad soldiers on the wind, and under Leir's stark and ragged flag of merciless blood, the grim light of battle was lit deep in the thousands of hidden eyes on this forested hill.



Chapter Twenty.

Pompey spurred the horse again as even though Julia was thirty years younger than him he was deeply concerned about his wife's welfare. This horse under him regardless of its pedigree was flagging however, and Pompey's fears deepened. He gave this excellent mount precious little respite today, allowing it just a few minutes rest at Lake Albano to take a much-needed drink before he pushed on up the Alban Hill and to his estate on its crown. Pompey goaded the horse again now for the last uphill sprint to his gates, with his men behind galloping hard to keep up with him on inferior horses as the Consul had made record time. His servants were well drilled, and the gates were swung open in time for him to clatter through them. Pompey did not bother heading for the stables, he just dismounted and headed directly for the portico, leaving the panting horse to a servant or its own devices.

Slaves and servants were rushing about the villa, and it was clear that Julia was in the final processes of giving birth. The smudge bowls were smoking in their niches in this marble atrium and between the fluted columns, and the midwives rushing in and out of the birthing chamber were obviously concerned as last night Julia was found to be in breech. She had endured a lengthy and terribly demanding labour so far, and the midwives had struggled throughout the night to turn the infant in her womb. By their panicky rushing about, Pompey was sure her ordeal was quickly coming to an end one way or another. Julia's screeching, coming from behind the diaphanous drapes surrounding her birthing bed tore at Pompey's soul as he waited, and he struggled to comprehend what could make brave and doughty Julia cry out so harrowingly. Pacing the beautiful but unseen mosaic floor in his abject helplessness, he cringed inside and felt a claw at his own guts with each of his beloved's screams, praying

continually for it to end. It felt as though his life had been suspended by the Gods as he waited, the hours stretching endlessly and agonisingly as he paced up and down on these coldly garish stones, gnawing at his already ragged fingernails. As Julia's desperate cries faded into pain wracked sobs, Pompey's concerns deepened as they dripped defeat and bespoke her utter exhaustion. Yet, after what seemed like three lifetimes had passed, a newborn baby's cries pierced the air and snapped Pompey out of his inwardly focused fugue. His eyes flew open as he was suddenly thrust into frantic but hopeless parenthood. The baby transpired to be a little girl, but her birth had been far from uneventful, taking a massive toll on her mother, and Julia was left pale and unmoving on the bed. Pompey was desperate with concern for his wife's health, and the Medicus too was deeply concerned for Julia as her bleeding was proving difficult to stop. The next hour or two would see if it stopped and Julia recovered, but the surgeon had advised Pompey to expect the worse as he believed the damage to her inner organs was irreparable. The child too was fighting for her life, and Pompey called out far and wide for medical experts, but Julia sadly died in her sleep that very night. The baby was premature and lived, but only just. Tragically, she too joined her mother a few days later, and Pompey was bereft from his losses.

Pompey was visited over the course of the following days and by many friends and dignitaries, all expressing their deepest condolences, the last of these being Cato. He offered his own sympathies to the general, but also pointed out that the political triumvirate will now be thrown into question, as no longer bound by family ties, Caesar will feel unrestrained in his quest for overall power. Shamelessly ignoring the general's grief, it was perhaps time for Pompey to face the problem of Caesar head on in Cato's carefully voiced if not dry opinion. The noble Cato insisted that it was time for Pompey to begin impeding that vainglorious man's oft-stated ambitions of one day ruling all Rome. The twin Consul leadership of Rome's senate was held sacred by the noble Cato, and those senators who busied themselves within it were due the highest honour in his oft-

voiced public opinion. Caesar could destroy all of it with his crass ambition for all outright dictatorship, and Cato was sworn to prevent it. He proposed that Pompey set out for Gaul immediately to put down the brewing rebellion there once and for all. Seeing that he would neatly undermine Caesar's power base and elevate himself in the process, Pompey was not convinced. Needing time to grieve for Julia and their lost baby, Pompey had no appetite for foreign invasion unless it was for the protection of Rome herself, and so far, this hotly rumoured rebellion had amounted to just that; hot air and rumour. His latest reports spoke of no mass assembly, and there had been no large scale or properly organised attacks on Roman troops in either Celtica or Belgica apart from the odd minor skirmish, which were commonplace across their vast territories. So, there was no real reason at this point in time for Pompey to take his legions back to Gaul and to usurp Julius Caesar, but he was a man who always kept his playing pieces close to his chest. As he travelled back to the capital, the ever-ambitious Cato did not exactly know where he stood in his bare feet or what Pompey would do.

Following a jam-packed memorial service in the city, Pompey wanted to transport Julia's and her baby's ashes back to his Alban villa where they would repose in the huge temple that he planned to build for them both there. However, the Roman people too loved Julia, and they declared in popular voice their wishes for her remains to rest in the city, more specifically the Field of Mars, to which the distraught Consul begrudgingly agreed. Permission in the form of a special 'decree of the senate' was required before this fraught event could take place, and so it was lobbied for loudly by many politicians and bayed for hotly by the plebian masses. Senators gathered to rush through this decree, but in the face of this popular and vociferous demand of the people, and to the disbelief of many of his peers, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, a friend of Cato's and another powerful Tribune of Rome balked at this, calling it sacrilege. Compelled by his hatred for Pompey and Caesar both, Ahenobarbus incurred the wrath of Rome's citizens and made several powerful enemies

when he procured a last-minute interdict from the tribunes banning the procedure.

Once Julia's body and that of her baby were cremated together, and after listening to an impassioned funeral oration in the forum to her memory, the people of Rome ignored the Tribunes and Ahenobarbus' interdiction, enforced their collective will and took away her urn regardless of any decree. They bore it away in a loud and triumphant procession through the narrow city streets, on to the field of Mars and Pompey's own complex in an uproarious parade, and the authorities were powerless to intervene. There, the ashes of the daughter of Caesar and a beloved daughter of Rome herself were laid at the feet of Venus Victrix in all her elemental yet womanly glory, and these grieving people were finally content, spreading out across this vast new complex to eat, drink and to honour Julia, daughter of Rome and her baby daughter. Ahenobarbus in contrast was nowhere to be found, as he had felt compelled to take a short holiday somewhere along with a few of his tribune friends.

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The sounds of crunching feet, clanking armour and the rattling and banging of thousands of marching men were loud now on this prophetic wind, and these grim, allied warriors draped on and around this hill in hiding prayed to their Gods as they prepared themselves for this imminent battle, with their pearly whites gleaming from angular, painted faces or from below dark, bristling and drooping moustaches of enormous proportion. Roughly half of the rectangular formations had passed them on the road below before their king made the signal to a cornwr and the war horns were finally blown. To the stark call of two uniquely Brythonic war horns cleaving the cold Galliad air of this vale, this covert side of Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr's *aer y synod* play fell into place, here in the besieged lands of the *combrogi* Eburones. Below an old and ragged but terrible red flag of annihilation, more than a thousand wild and grinning Gorddoficau and Essyllwyr fighters of the highest water rose up. With the

red dragon tattoos on their thick arms shown proud and their long, drooping moustaches bristling, these warriors fell into the right flank of the Romans along with an equal number of Llefelys' Gwenelly warriors attacking the opposite flank, and they caught them completely by surprise. More Galliad volunteers charged from the trees and attacked the Romans' front and rear ranks simultaneously, and the mindless, unnerving chaos of total *Brythonic* battle ensued among the glittering but stalled ranks of Rome once more.

It was noted by the bards that King Gwerdded ap Nynniaw of Gogledd Khumry in his insurmountable fury looked very much like his late father in battle; a highly skilled man who had been the uncontested champion swordsman of all Prydein. His glorious son demonstrated why this evening, as he slew these elite Romans with a blazing, white-hot fury unseen in these parts for generations. His vaunted *ewythr* beside him was equally ferocious wielding the repaired and sacred blade of his procreator in his dazzling white armour, and the terrifying, sibilant lament to the Gods of *Teryll-arial* was heard on the wind once more following a lengthy silence. In his regal successor Llefelys' powerful fist, dozens of Romans fell to its deadly and 'Piercing-spirit', and the very late King Leir ap Bladud Fawr's long and ragged pennant of blood fluttered its desolate promise of obliteration over them all.

Only the Roman officers and their vanguard managed to reach the safety of their fortress before the trap had been fully sprung and the box closed. The garrison had opened its gates and some cavalry had poured out to support them, but the vast majority of their foraging force were not so fortunate. They had been utterly ambushed, caught out in the open between the horns of two incensed bulls and trapped within them, and their accurate formations and their exact manoeuvring did not and could not save them. What was left of this fleeing cavalry's compatriots were strewn across that road or fighting in the remaining mass of legionaries trapped on it, and those embattled ranks were completely cut off on all sides. They seemed to have become swarmed by an army of brown

creatures under a long, ragged and fluttering flag of blood, and these officers watched horrified as their men were destroyed. Rome's finest were stunned into a shocked silence as their enlisted men and their less fortunate comrades were subsumed by that ungodly horde of barbarian warriors on this road behind them with their long and flashing steel blades. By the time these shocked officers of the 14th Legion could regroup and their newly arrived cavalry made ready for a charge, those wildly uncontrollable Gaulish warriors were already melting away as quickly as they had appeared. So, as they watched wide eyed and slack jawed, in just a few minutes, there was no one to attack, and on closer inspection there was nobody left to rescue.

As the dust began to settle, the *volones* of the 14th were consigned to collecting the numerous dead legionaries from the blood-spattered road and both gore filled ditches, as their *equites* had withdrawn to the fortress for their evening meal. The enemy had taken their dead and wounded with them, which spoke of their improved organisation and their recent rebellious planning. When the last parts of the last remaining dead Roman soldiers, and all the scattered weapons and bits of broken armour were retrieved, loaded onto the hand carts and carried back toward the fortress by these euphemistically named 'volunteer slaves', a fast rider was seen exiting those gates and tearing off toward the coast, no doubt with a sealed message for Labienus at Portus Itius. It would surely report this highly organised and costly attack on their legion and its burgeoning new fortress here on the plain of Eburone, along with all the latest intelligence and rumour hereabouts of the building rebellion. These forlorn men on this blood torn and stinking battlefield who watched that rider depart were sure that the sealed report he carried would find swift passage across the channel and to their rampaging General Caesar in Prittan.

Corresponding reports were sent southeast with riders toward Cisalpine Gallia by the garrison commander, and more were sent by him in similar haste to Rome by fast galleon. All were heading for the capitol eventually, and to where a number of important recipients would be kept informed of

these developments. Some of the addressees would be well known whilst others would be less so, but there were inevitably a few hidden copies somewhere on the person of those messengers destined for powerful but nameless people in that far distant Roman city state.



Chapter Twenty-One.

As Caswallawn was reinforcing the approaches to his own capital, he received news of Commios and Afarwy's treachery with the most apoplectic rage, and nobody could venture near him for many hours without risking their very lives. That Trinobantan king, who had proved so obstinate and uncooperative in his dealings with Caswallawn had allied with his most hated enemy and the known lackey of Caesar; Commios. There were many common and well known englyns and insulting rhymes levelled at the disgraced King Commios by the Brythons and their bards, as he had been known to have spent his time between invasions in the Roman General's regular company and at his fortress in Gaul. A scathing but all too accurate joke about 'Caesar stopping suddenly' was doing the rounds regarding Commios and was heard repeated among these outraged aristocrats among many others. That disgraced and once exiled king of the Atrebatau was a known rogue and was trusted by no one of any authority or judgement. Commios' declared hatred of Caswallawn and Casufelawny itself was known across Prydain, and the man had spent the last ten years of his life opposing Caswallawn's successes and doing his utmost to bring Casufelawny down, gaining him a widely held notoriety. That the academic Afarwy had succumbed to the blackguard Commios' treasonous proposals, regardless of his diplomatic past had surprised many who had known him in his erstwhile professional role. It was perhaps his inability to galvanise the disparate tribes of his late father's kingdom, and Afarwy's failure to bring his famed organisational skills to bear on the problem of Trinobanta was what had ultimately undermined his allegiances and his kingship. Or perhaps the reverse was true, as the warriors of any Brythonic tribe are slow to respond to such highbrow opinions and intellectual concepts, being notoriously more susceptible to the roared out and clearly understood blood sworn oaths of old. Success

had come easily to Lord Androgeus of the age-old establishment, but it had eluded the modern King Afarwy. The long-fractured tribes of Trinobanta were crying out for a violent, all-powerful and merciless warlord in all their ancient traditions, and the imperious somewhat scholastic, erstwhile Lord Androgeus did not quite fit that bill. The fact that Afarwy had actually gone with Commios to offer his surrender to Caesar incensed Caswallawn, and it had forced a sudden and unwanted alteration to his planning. Afarwy had clearly been persuaded to offer the Roman general the triple-crown of Trinobanta along with the cygils of his five minor tribes by Commios, and it was nothing short of treason. Succumbing to the yellow dog as vassals and submitting to the Roman's rule, Afarwy had surrendered Trinobanta completely, and he had further agreed to give Caesar a small number of slaves and a promise of yearly tribute, giving up his and all his people's freedom and their honour forever. These, according to Caswallawn's furious agents had all been offered with a caveat; in that Caesar in return would support Afarwy in his attempt to regain his throne, and to take further arms against Caswallawn should he continue to transgress against his abandoned kingdom. Trinobanta was the very kingdom Caswallawn's men and women had been *dying* to protect from the murderous visitations of those Roman invaders these bloody weeks past, and this palpable fabrication enraged all southern Prydein. This finally had broken the king's bad mood however, and Caswallawn had laughed uproariously at this development, seeing instantly the shortsightedness of Afarwy's bold treason, and too the inherent flaws in Caesar's agreed plans in his own regard. This intrepid son of Beli Mawr, being a man of profound strategy was playing the long game in the Brythons' most popular pastime by the werrin and the aristocracy alike, and perhaps unknown to the foreign general, Caswallawn, like his father was an acknowledged *bones* master. The game of bones has set rules and protocols, established generations before it arrived here from the middle east almost two millennia previously. This complex and enduringly popular game was brought here more than a thousand years ago and by a young princess known as Taram ferch Dungi,

and she had been a very striking young *Gutian* noblewoman with the whitest of long hair. She had fled from her home in war torn Mesopotamia, bringing this very old game with her along with many other pastimes and traditions. This aristocratic teenager's father King Dungi's ancient lands had been attacked and overrun by the fierce and thirsty Hittites, descending on him from the desiccated north of Mesopotamia en-masse, and so he had sent his beloved daughter, known to him familiarly as 'Albina' away from his capital citadel and to the sanctuary of the mysterious 'summer isles'. This was clearly to save Albina's life, but also to preserve the king's treasured lineage which went back to the Gods themselves. Being a favourite game of the younger Gutian aristocracy, the young Princess Albina had preserved the tradition of *bones* on her journey here and when she and her noble entourage had finally settled in the 'land of rivers', giving it its honoured name; Albion. Although they had found land at Caint in southern Lloegr that day so long ago, they had travelled north almost the length of the country to where the land had beguiled and had held them. Filled with high, snow topped mountains and rushing rivers of the purest water, it was utterly different to their arid and featureless homeland, and to any country they had seen on their travels. These nobles began a long and illustrious line of progeny in the north of Prydein once they had found safety there and had discovered a land which could support their princess and her growing tribe. The royal and aristocratic game Albina had brought here had evolved over those many interceding generations, from the simple old Mesopotamian way of tossing five knuckle bones into the air and the chance result of their falling pattern on the ground to become a board game. Uniquely in Prydein, it had developed since that adventurous and noble lady's time here into a game of sublime strategy. It took place now on a crude but familiar and long-established board with opposing rows of cups, squares or circles, but the design remained roughly the same more than two centuries later. Each gaming piece had been beautifully carved into various seated animals, and some of the subtler moves developed over these generations by Prydein's finest *pencampwr yr asgwrn* were unfathomable

to most ordinary players. These misdirecting moves were often slow to unfold and hesitant to reveal their stark duplicity like a glossy wing on one of Lug Ddu's black ravens, and they could be bewildering to an amateur. Often at an impasse or a stalemate, the old way of tossing five carved bones up and the pattern they made on landing was still used to decide the matter, but the main body of the game had become one of magnificent treachery, bold deception and a ferocious killing instinct. Since the rash northern exclusion which he privately now rued, it was fortunate that Caswallawn was a renowned expert in the antediluvian machinations of this most ancient Brythonic game of all, as from now on, he was going to need every sneaky trick he had ever learned on the knee of Beli Mawr.

Relaxing in his favourite lodges atop the inner keep of this vast fortress of *CaerGwlyb*, Caswallawn took another deep draught of today's excellent sweet mead. Getting himself comfortable, he considered this unusually large and twin palisaded fortress of his. This ancient inner keep lay on a low granite hill rising from the heart of the palisaded outer fortress all around him, and he felt at home here. This interior dun which he had renovated completely and had furnished at such eyewatering cost was formed and flanked by a moated and a palisaded wall, the tops of which vanished into the misty distance. This ancient inner keep was surrounded on two sides by the deepest part of the moat, yet the larger spread of the *outer* walled caer lay between the two rivers of *afon Lygan* and *afon Fer*. It is surrounded by an endless outer palisade and a fearsome, triple ditch system, making this huge fortress a daunting prospect for any attacking force. In its draining and building it had been a veritable devourer of gold, but he had not had the foresight at that time to install a hidden escape route from this fortress such as the natural one which had saved *CaerCelgwern*. The land around his massive outer caer was flat and lightly wooded, but the fortress itself and this inner keep were secure. Caswallawn would be the first to admit that no dun was unconquerable, and there was still much work to be done here as there is in every one of his strongholds, especially considering what he had learned in recent

weeks from the Romans. Draining the cup of mead, he considered the move in play on the bone board of his imagination and the short-term planning regarding his enemy. As he refilled his cup with the delicious warm mead from a silver jug, he appreciated that Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr's 'fire of surprise' attack which Caswallawn had decided to employ weeks earlier had only succeeded those generations ago as it was backed up by ferocious and unseen reserves. It was that man's unmatched reputation which had really swayed the balance and had won that day so long ago. If the diversion and the *undermining* subterfuge of his '*aer y synod*' ploy had failed, that wily old pendragon had been fully prepared to commit each and every piece on the board before him to the second phase of the manoeuvre; win or lose, and to the victory or to the demise of all. His enemies knew well of this steely determination to *carry through* in all things, and which had always complimented the hot dragon's blood which had coursed through Caswallawn's bold ancestors and the legendary High King Cuneglas' veins in particular. On that famously victorious day long ago and when at the game of bones, Cuneglas' *aer y synod* gambit and his unshakeable determination to back it up had won him a kingdom.

This was where Caswallawn stood now, proudly behind the front and centre cup of the bone board of his mind and awaiting the twin effects of the move in play; the *aer y synod*, in the earnest hope of success but prepared too for the repercussions in the event it eluded him. Although having only a fraction of the hypothetical reserves enjoyed by Cuneglas on that day long passed, if Caswallawn's gambit failed, he too was totally committed to release all his reserves and commence what will surely be the final battle of this war. Whatever transpired at game's end, Caswallawn knew that one day soon, his next meeting with Caesar will be decisive; win or lose, and to the victory or to the demise of all his people.

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The kings of Caint took the vanguard, and finally after so much tense and apprehensive waiting and to a mournful call of a distant horn, this bold

attack on the circular Roman fortress began. The renowned *Dug-Fawr* Dodion ap Dygweullo led his warriors of the Cornafau Dde across this soft sand, from the south and below his colourful *sword-and-war-horn* banner, held low for the moment. Alongside this famous 'Grand-Duke' grunted the doubled over figure of King Brithael of Demeta, virtually anonymous in his long and black fox fur cape. Both these middle-aged leaders had travelled east to be here this early morning, coming from Prydein's two great south-western peninsula kingdoms to do war against these Roman invaders. Brithael's black-fox warriors of southwestern Khumry were interspersed with the elite shadow-stalkers of his vassal Wythonau, coming from the *toe* of his peninsular Khumric kingdom and the 'vale of the sword'. All these professional killers ran together across this beach in the same undignified crouch now, as they needed to stay below the glimmering skyline of the ocean behind them. Guerthaeth's northern Khumric warriors had mixed easily but silently with the Grand Duke's far-southern comrades at their assembly point, as there was very little to say to each other on this nascent and portentous morning. This allied force surged forwards as one low and dark wave of onrushing death, and King Guerthaeth of Fenedotia-Gwen led his brave people from the front. Guerthaeth and his noble six-hundred were just yards away from the first ditch when the alarm went up and the great beacon was lit within that huge fortress. The guards patrolling the circular battlements had been taken first by archers, giving these breathless Brythons the few extra and precious moments to approach the first ditch unscathed, and so they could throw down the long and heavy timber boards they carried with them. Then they charged over these bouncing planks to assault that great gatehouse dividing the curving palisade before them, and a great roar went up from this host. Guerthaeth screamed his people on and leapt up to the palisade, waving his warriors to follow. The scaling ladders were rushed up, but Roman archers were now firing down into them, and it became a maelstrom around the gates, with Brythonic bodies dropping constantly.

A detachment of specialist slingers had climbed a rise in the ground between the rearmost, northwestern curve of the huge fortress fronting this shore. With their shoulders bulging, they began to rotate these larger and new, *continental* slings around themselves on this low hilltop. With capacious leather cups stitched into their centres, these heavy-duty slings were ideal for the job. Their heavy ammunition began to ponderously circle this row of slingers then, their weight adding to the centrifugal force as they rose. Thirty-three of Gurgallo's bombs lifted in dizzying circles and carved bright hoops of sparking light around each of these slingers from their burning fuses. As loud and alien horns of alarm rang harsh into the air, Roman heads appeared above the western battlements, but with one huge roar, the claypot fuel bombs were released. These missiles arced through the pale morning sky, trailing bright sparks and streaks of greasy black smoke behind them. More volleys of Gurgallo's bombs quickly followed, and the Romans craned their necks to watch these unfamiliar missiles soar over their heads, to then crash into explosive splinters on the decking of the ships behind them. Hot, flammable liquid splashed everywhere, and the stuttering '*whoomph*' of many explosive ignitions could be heard all the way down the beach. As screams began to mix with the loud alarm calls and the shouted call to arms rose noticeably within, that captive Roman fleet began to burn.

Guerthaeth although short in stature was ferocious in battle, and he led his Khumric *six hundred* to attack the gatehouse and the main entrance to this huge circular fortress, screaming his head off. They had made great gains but at a punishing cost, as now the Roman beast was awake it was a terrible thing and they struggled to contain it. The twin rows of deep ditches were slowly filling with valiant Brythonic attackers all around this vast circular fortification as all here knew what was at stake, and each battling Brython was acutely aware that at this moment, their king was embattled by Caesar himself and at his last remaining bolthole; his capital. Roman archers had eventually taken care of those specialist slingers on the high ground, but not before they had fired over forty of their leviathan vessels with 'Gurgallo's bombs'. All these ships were

tightly moored together in that fortress by necessity, and the whole southwestern corner of this huge enclosure was now ablaze. Romans could be seen by those scattered slingers scurrying over those inundated ships by the hundred as they hurriedly doused their ships in sea water with long chains of men, all swathed in soaking wool and armed with leather buckets. These few surviving heavy slingers were out of their explosive ammunition sadly, and so they watched the furious and orchestrated battle against the flames by those super-efficient Romans from the trees. Their brave and frantic, choreographed efforts managed to put out those huge fires, but a large section of Caesar's fleet was left a smouldering and smoking ruin.

The huge clouds of black smoke rising from the rear of this foreign and monstrous fortress gave all its besiegers hope, and King Guerthaeth led his gallant warriors into the melee at the great gates. When these great timber gates eventually gave out under their immense attack upon it, Guerthaeth screamed his war cry and charged into the interior brandishing his heirloom long sword. The musical voices of his surviving men and women boomed out behind him; 'Khumry am byth! Prydein am byth!', encouraging him to push ever onwards. Inspired by their valiant warcries, this reduced but courageous Khumric company charged headlong into history, but the gruesome defenders of this fortress were ready for them, as the Romans had been throughout this invasion. This deadly welcoming party which had formed into an inescapable, reverse crescent inside the sundered gatehouse was festooned with long pikes and javelin, and it was thick with grisly and seasoned Roman troops. Propelled uncontrollably forward by the onrush of the ranks behind, the wild and screaming warriors of Gogledd Khumry ran right onto them in their madness, and their small but courageous king was the first to be impaled upon this sharp and unflinching Roman greeting. The cold and accommodating steel of Rome awaited them all on this desperately demanding and deeply poignant but ultimately doomed day of *bones*. King Guerthaeth of Fenedotia-Gwen and his legendary six hundred brave Khumro died attacking that foreign fortress, as did over three thousand

other Brythonic heroes. Inside and out, these brave werrin were butchered incisively by the professional *milwr* of Rome. When the legionaries finally stormed out of their gates and took the battle to their attackers, none could stand against their tightly fitting and impenetrable ranks. Whatever their general had achieved a hundred miles north, this seasoned and experienced garrison of his had prevailed and Mamurra's fortress had stood, protecting Caesar's great fleet within it and these men's only means of transport home. As the defeated survivors of this reckless attack withdrew into the trees, many of them had to be dragged away or were dragging themselves off the field, broken and beaten. The last of these brave Brythonic assailants who were past fleeing were being savagely put to the javelin and to the sword on these soft and once golden sands of Caint by their merciless victors. Their bodies were discarded into the blood filled and body strewn ditches to both sides of this road and all along the curving approach to that smoking fortress, but not before they were all thoroughly looted to wild and triumphant cheering. As the rest of these relieved foreign soldiers emerged from the smoking ruin of their gatehouse to survey the countless bodies around their fort, two Roman biremes appeared over the southern horizon like two tiny dots.

Within the hour, these fabulous vessels with their twin banks of dazzlingly white oars had swooped boldly and flamboyantly into Caint. Entering the great estuary in fine and colourful form and with their pennants streaming, they both made a celebrated landing in their newly rescued, battered and smoking but protective berth.

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A loud and sudden blare of foreign horns cleaved the sky from the south, a stark declaration, and terrifying proof that Caesar the yellow dog of Rome had discovered CaerGwlyb; Caswallawn's capital, and perhaps all Prydain's capital this sad day of selfish sedition.

Caswallawn roused himself quickly, descending the spiral staircase from his lodges as the clarion call to arms rang harshly throughout the corridors

and chambers of his suddenly galvanised caer. He and all Prydein knew for certain now that Afarwy had given up the location of his caer when he had surrendered Trinobanta. The proof of that disgruntled king's treachery was revealed now to all these Brythons and from the southern forest's edge. The glittering ranks of Caesar's legions had emerged from the trees some minutes ago, and they crossed afon Lygan unopposed and broke into the clearing before this palisaded citadel now with a loud roar, making it clear that they and their general had come here to finish this war. Within this sprawling fortress, the cattle had all been herded together inside the huge interior palisade of this caer and not for their own protection, as they would be caused to panic at the right moment with dogs, loud brass whistles and dozens of stockwhips, and this unavoidable and deadly stampede would be directed through the quickly opened gates. The terrified cattle would then charge uncontrollably into the vanguard of the oncoming Romans, blowing the heavy soldiers in the front ranks clear off the paved approach ramp to these gates. Those attackers would be forced by these stampeding and incensed, long horned cattle into the deadly and festooned ditches to either side of the chariot ramp and to their certain deaths. The gates would then be slammed shut behind the maddened cattle and barricaded, this at least was part of the plan for the beginning of this great battle to come.

As King Caswallawn came out of his keep and onto the broad expanse of his caer's interior, the sound and smell of this captive herd was strong, but he could see men and women racing to their posts, and warriors gesticulating wildly to him from the high western battlements. The young lords and ladies with all their chattels were retiring via the northwestern gate and heading into the adjacent town, which itself had been emptying steadily of its werrin since the rude arrival of these foreign savages. The civilians and children of this very ancient community all headed for the hill caves of their ancestors with their valuables, their animals, and whatever else of a sensible nature they could carry with them, on handcarts or in jute bags. All the children filed out behind them in a long chain, hand-in-hand and it made a pitiful sight. The Romans sent forces around this

fortress to both north and south on arrival, but his people had been given enough notice by his excellent scouts and so Caswallawn knew they would make it to the trees and safety. Caswallawn's chariots were secreted outside and among the trees at the surrounding fringes to the south, ready to cover their retreat or to attack, if and when either became necessary. Caswallawn's ferocious *bronze-shield* gŵyrd remained, and they were assembled on the wide stone courtyard before the gatehouse and the grass around it, armed to the teeth and facing the main gates with grim expressions. Two great mounds of rocks were piled up on the crowns of those huge gate towers above them, and these were to be levered off or thrown down onto the Romans from the killing gantry above the gates following the stampeding of the beasts. The clamour from the battlements increased then, overpowering the lowing of these jostling cows and heifers, and Caswallawn pushed his way through them, heading for the gatehouse palisade. Mounting the apron and then climbing the timber steps to the fighting platform around the left-hand gate tower, soldiers shifted along, bowing to him and giving him room. From the top of this tower, Caswallawn watched grimly as rank upon rank of those glimmering, foreign warriors assembled before his capital. He could clearly see the *yellow dog* at the heart of those formations before the distant river in all his terrible glory, and Caswallawn spat over the palisade at him. General Gaius Julius Caesar, Governor of Gaul and commander of Rome's invasion forces was here for conquest on his white stallion, and Caswallawn saw his massively armoured breach force gather in front of his glittering forward ranks and detach themselves, preparing for the mad dash to the first great obstacle. This was a veritable pyramid of tree trunks, all spiked with long iron nails and precariously piled one on top of another by his engineers and dismantling it under fire looked a fearsome challenge. It had been erected over a hundred reeds from these gates and at the gravel apron to the long chariot ramp below, being only the first of such monstrous and deadly barricades. The palisades of CaerGwlyb were packed with archers and slingers now, all standing shoulder to shoulder as they surveyed this vast army Caesar had brought here to destroy them.

On their faces were written the stark truth of this fearful day, and all here were sure it would be their last, as they were outnumbered, outmanoeuvred and there was clearly no escape for any of them. The heavily armoured and bulky looking Roman vanguard was almost ready now, and it was surrounded by a great rectangle of legionaries, each armed with a pair of their long shields. One was for their own heads, and the other for the formation of broad and muscular denizens wielding their great axes inside of them. Armed and shielded in this ingenious way, Caesar's fearsome breach force advanced. That banging and crashing, steel clad formation which marched inexorably toward that first great obstacle looked like a giant metal turtle on the ground from these battlements, and as it approached the first pair of white markers on the ground, the biggest and strongest of these massed archers loosed. These were mostly the specialist Khumric archers with their musclebound arms and their yew bows that few others could even string let alone draw, and these broad chested experts rained their long arrows down onto their enemy in great curving arcs and at the furthest range possible. Clouds of their arrows lanced into the sky, to vanish into sunlight before reappearing moments later like clouds of black pins, to fall accurately onto their enemy's heads or their shields. That Roman vanguard was suddenly bristling with almost vertical arrows, looking more like a hedgehog suddenly, and about a dozen Romans fell at its fringes, but it caused no break in its inexorable advance. More and more of those fletched and pointed demons joined their counterparts with every moment that passed, but as a few more Romans fell at the sides of that great beast below, and one or two within its tiled shell hit the dirt, it caused no let nor pause in its slow but deadly crawl toward the first great obstacle and their huge gates. The heavily burdened brutes in the front ranks used their big steel hooks on long iron chains, and under the most furious volleys of arrows from these palisades they tore down the first line of CaerGwlyb's additional defences with a series of loud crashes, but to no obvious Roman injury. The crashing and clanking of this heavily armoured and solidly protected formation approaching them sounded like the

marching of a great giant in metal boots on the gravelled road below now. As this Roman *machine* drew near to the second pair of little white flags stuck in the gravel to either side of this broad approach road and the next great pile of tree trunks between them, they drew within range of the slingers, and clouds of stones arced into the sky from the palisades to either side of this fortified entrance in response. The sound they made on impact was like a thunderous storm of sharp granite hail, and their attackers reeled from this biting tempest. More Romans fell beneath this rocky onslaught and from more arrows from the Khumric archers on these high palisades, but the Romans sent reinforcements scuttling up to take the places of the fallen among the ring of outer protectors. Those brave men continued to struggle valiantly to shelter themselves and the monstrous breach force in the interior of their moving formation with their shields, as amid the most withering shot, these muscular men at the front threw their long iron chains over the top of the next towering obstacle. Whilst tight to its face, their front ranks were obviously shielded from the avalanche of pebbles and arrows which Caswallawn's men and women relentlessly fired at them, but it must have been a far more precarious position behind that great pile of trunks as the hooks bit and the chains tightened. Those stout iron chains tautened visibly as the unseen vanguard put their backs to them, and so their protectors backed away, braving the onslaught from this fortress once more and keeping their shields high. As the trees began to tumble from that final bastion with great singular crashes, more rude blaring of Roman horns sounded from their rear, and there was a flurry of activity at their rearmost ranks in response to this brash and ascending scale of notes. This was perhaps the final and decisive onslaught that all in this fortress feared and waited for, and a profound silence fell on these captive Brythons at this ominous blare of hated Roman horns. This further movement of their enemy was a concern to all watching over the sharpened treetops of CaerGwlyb's palisade. One eagle-eyed lookout spotted two late arrivals however, breaking this spell, and he pointed out this pair of Roman dispatch riders to his comrades. These two fast riders had just arrived from the coast in

some haste, and it caused great interest in the Brythonic ranks of this corner. Caswallawn and his gŵyr were notified and were quick to evaluate this occurrence for themselves, and even from here, the body language of the crowd of Roman officers around those two latecomers gave a clue to the kind of news they may carry.

Caswallawn smiled like a shark from these battlements as a gold coated, hound shaped knuckle bone had just fallen into a circular pit to one side of his mental game board. It was clear that the final phase of Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr's *aer y synod* had opened its other glossy black wing. The attack on the beachhead had been carried out, of that Caswallawn was now coldly certain. Any level of success or failure was yet unknown to him, but that mass assault had been far from any decisive confrontation in his planning. As the final, desperate reserves in his risky bone play were gathering in this vast interior below him, he was sure now that the attack on that invaded beach in Caint had played its part. It should act as a salutary reminder to Caesar and to all his men, that whatever happens now and regardless of today's outcome, his resources and their very means of escape will always be vulnerable to him or his successor, and subconsciously too this should have undermined his enemy's confidence. Llefelys and Gwerdded had applied similar pressure in Gallia, however, there had been no evidence so far of either bold assault having any effect on these determined Romans. As the third and last great pyramid of timber was torn down to a series of loud timber crashes and the age-old gates of CaerGwlyb were all that remained, Caswallawn's fears were confirmed to another cacophony of alien, Roman horns. Caesar it seems was undeterred and unwavering, as were Afarwy and Commios, and they had obviously come here to destroy him and all his people this day regardless and in a sickening power play, one which could threaten all Lloegr. His charioteers were ready, and his secondary and last formations of Brythonic warriors were assembling now on the low and marshy ground beyond the afon Fer. This lush ground lay inside the great *outer* palisade of his caer and near a wide, concealed southern gatehouse. They represented the final phase, and the *flanking* denouement of what could

be his very last bone play of all. These lords, ladies and his irreplaceable officers represented the very best of his people, and although now they were priceless when considering the future of all his drastically reduced southern kingdoms, one way or another, win or lose and to the hazard of all, *they* were his very last reserves. Acknowledging perhaps that he possessed only a fraction of the reputation, the conviction and the backup of his revered ancestor; the great Cuneglas ap Marganus Fawr, Caswallawn would be forced into the menacing finale of that great man's *aer y synod* ploy, and which by threat alone had carried the day for that legendary pendragon so long ago. Caswallawn's threat had clearly been ignored by that vainglorious Roman general and his Belgic co-conspirators, and so, in victory or defeat, the bold, garrulous and noble charioteers of southern Prydein will decide the matter here in Casufelawny today.

Caswallawn was pulled and pushed on this bench in his lodges as his two arwein strapped on his fabulous and infamous Lynx armour, both remaining pale and expressionless throughout. The king focused his mind on what may well be his last battle in this world and the series of events which had brought him to this decisive day. Whatever precipitous position he now took on the mental bone board of this great war, he had played his pieces brilliantly in his own opinion, especially considering his huge initial error in the northern exclusion and his frustrating subsequent limitations. He had been successful many times however, often taking great risks to convince Caesar to follow him, or to return to his camp each time it was required. He was comforted by the knowledge that the mercurial, guerrilla style of fighting which he had developed through the winter had cost his enemy dear, but it had come at great personal cost too. This merciless and unflinching training he had forced on his people throughout the dark months and which had raised so much objection initially, proved to be the one and only effective way of fighting the yellow dog and his peerless soldiery, which together had conquered all Gallia. Thinking back to those reports he had received before Caesar had set sail and the resulting laughter from his gŵyrd at their contents, he spat to the

straw now with a snarl, wishing he and his officers had not given them such short thrift and such low regard. Sure, they had all seen the declared numbers of the ships in that fleet, but no one had been prepared for the sheer size of those gigantic vessels nor their blistering artillery, and those reports had stated that there could have been several hundred Galliad traders among them, another misconception. Caesar had returned in more than eight hundred gigantic ships, built and armed with weapons for the Gods themselves, and they had been packed to the gunnels with experienced and seasoned invasion troops. The yellow dog had even thought to bring his cavalry with him on this occasion, and they had made *a//* the difference. Perhaps it had been the lurid and frankly ludicrous description of Caesar's great serpent-faced war beast that had undermined the integrity of those reports, it was hard to tell in retrospect, but Caswallawn wished now that he had not labelled those intelligences the exaggerations of a terrified combrogi over the water. Had those genuine reports generated the fear and respect they had demanded of him and had the baulked northern triad joined him once more in support, the yellow dog and all his murderous swine would have been slaughtered weeks ago, especially if Ederus had returned with his Gadwyr. He spat to the straw at his feet again as his squires buckled down the last strap as none of that mattered now on this historic, conclusive day. Due to Afarwy and Commios' treachery, all his and his people's efforts of last year were now wasted, and it seems those two Belgic rogues and their Roman friends were now poised to *officially* conquer all Lloegr, and perhaps in time all southern Prydein. That the yellow dog and those two traitors may beat him to his own overall goal was maddening to say the least, and Caswallawn growled at the stinging injustice, oblivious to the irony. Whatever today's outcome however, he knew that without the tireless exercises in organised movement and rotational relief, and the endless practice he had forced on these men and women, they would not have achieved half of their successes in this great defensive campaign. Excused of the trials he had his gŵyrd put them through in those cold winter months, no Brythonic force could have stood to the demands he

had made of them so far in this highly complex war. Caswallawn was acutely aware that every soul sheltering in his great fortress knew that today however he was demanding the ultimate sacrifice from them, as did all Prydein. He had been told yesterday by his spies that Caesar knew the location of CaerGwlyb, and his valiant men and women were all that stood now in the face of this monstrous and professional, foreign onslaught supported by turncoat combrogi. All their options, or lack thereof had been discussed at that war council, and with the full realisation of their dire circumstances and the unbeaten forces that would likely be arrayed against them, cold reality had reduced those options to naught. Every soul in this fortress had attended the great meeting the previous evening after the feast, and none had been in any doubt as to the sacrifice required of them should that Roman come here in arms as they would be defending the capital of Arglwydd Prydein herself. At the first blare of those Roman horns earlier and the confirmation of what all here had been dreading, Caswallawn's people had borne this crushing responsibility with the strength and character he knew they all possessed. He had been immensely proud as he had taken their oaths around the great bale fire on the parade ground last night, and he had kissed each pale and grubby face before they knelt, many of which were known and loved by him. However shaken they may have been within, not one had showed him anything but a bright-eyed devotion and the deep, almost bottomless courage that he had come to admire and to need so much. Caswallawn understood profoundly that he would need *a//* their rare and uncommon valour this day of days, now that Caesar had shown his bloody hand. As these two nervous young squires armoured their beleaguered king for perhaps the last time, they were both pale, silent and subdued around him. There was no denying the crushing emotional weight this imminent, final battle was having on all Casufelawny, and it hung over this fortress and the whole vale now like a huge black and malevolent bird.

Rearranging his expression, Caswallawn emerged fully armed and armoured from his keep, and he was surprised and immensely proud when a great roaring cheer went up from the battlements and from the

host on the great maes before him. He could not help the broad grin that broke out across his face, as the white teeth of his Brythons had broken out throughout his caer and all along those high palisades at his appearance. Holding his sword fist high, Caswallawn accepted the ovation and nodded back to his roaring warriors, all brandishing spears and long blades with great gusto all over this huge and thundering fortress. Pushing through the steaming and jostling herd of cattle before the gatehouse once more and squelching absently through warm pats of their ordure, Caswallawn took the steps up to the fighting gantry of the left-hand gate tower again, two steps at once this time in his enthusiasm now the final scene was set. He jostled affably with his gŵyr now on this broad timber platform, and they drew to him again, greeting him warmly and affirming their commitments with bows, smiles and handshakes. All his senior gŵyrd were there, and their serious nods and equally dangerous smiles were reassuring. This was it, and they all knew it.

More Roman horns blew harsh into the air, and the eyes of these beleaguered people hardened, turning to the west. In the face of this closely approaching breach force looking like an enormous, plated porcupine on the maes below them and boldly marching up the ramp and to the gatehouse they defended, these warriors around their king were now all grinning terribly, to a man and to a woman. Their adamantine smiles matched both their hard stares and the cat-like snarls of Caswallawn's pale green lynx banners fluttering from the towers above and around them, and it made the king's heart swell. These heroic Brythons prepared themselves now for what was very likely their last battle on this their final day on this earth, and Caswallawn was simply bursting with pride. More Roman horns cleaved the sky to the west, jabbing at the nerves of all these breathless Brythons, and they tensed, preparing their missiles, their bows and their slings, fully expecting more armoured men to surge forward in support of that vanguard below, and who were about to start hacking at the gates under them so close were they now. The warriors on the gate towers armed themselves with long iron rods to begin levering the great boulders off their platforms, and the

massed men and women below them and behind the huge gates to this fortress tensed too, prepared now to fling them open and to let this huge herd of lowing cattle behind them loose. The stockmen with their shrill whistles and their whips and their trembling dogs were all poised, and even the cattle seemed to know what was coming as they had become restless and noisy, shuffling their great hooves in anticipation of the unknown. Roman horns continued to blare from the river sharp and loud, clearly possessing unknown signals and stridently washing over their furious vanguard, these gates, the palisades and everyone behind them, ratcheting up the fear and the tension in this great but fatally besieged fortress. The hard smiles of acceptance faded suddenly across these fraught battlements, and the bow strings and the leather slings of all these tense and anxious warriors relaxed, confusion suddenly showing clear on the long rows of pale faces above the sharp tips of these palisades and to either side of this huge gatehouse. Without warning, the arrow studded, gapped and battered, heavily protected Roman vanguard about faced, almost under them and at the threshold of this caer's entrance. For some unfathomable reason, they were now retreating quickly, marching back toward their comrades arrayed before that distant river and at the double step. Those clamorous Roman horns had fallen silent now their men had obeyed, and the silence which fell across CaerGwlyb at this unexpected manoeuvre was profound, and it endured. Not a soul dared to breathe, as astonishingly it looked as if those Romans were retreating and preparing to march away from here. They were forming up to march back to where they had come, and as their heavily armoured vanguard re-joined its curiously silent host, those glittering formations began to change like some shapeshifting metal monster. Whatever the reason, it became clear that the siege of Caswallawn's capital, which was all Prydein's Capital today had been postponed. Some even suggested it may even have been cancelled indefinitely as a great consternation had clearly gripped those invaders. Caesar and his officers, his one boar hound and his two Belgian lapdogs; Afarwy and Commios were surrounded by their cavalry equites and they all thundered off to the

south, vanishing into the trees and leaving their enlisted men to hurriedly assemble in their precise and glittering, rectangular formations and to follow on. The news those Romans had received from the coast obviously had the import to call them back to their beachhead in all haste, and yet no one here could still quite believe it. Their king's face was inscrutable among them as he watched his enemy retreat, but his eyes were glittering far brighter than that moving Roman armour or the river behind it ever could. As those shining blocks of enemy soldiers began to march south in their general's wake, these people's thoughts flew ahead of those retreating, rectangular enemy formations and to the coast. Their concerns now lay with their brave combrogi as whatever the upshot of their perilous beach assault, it had clearly drawn Caesar back to his fleet in great concern. All who stood wide eyed and dry mouthed on these battlements watching their enemy march away into those distant trees knew. They knew the only price which could have paid for such a miracle, and every soul watching was struck dumb by its import. The expected cheering at Caesar's shocking withdrawal never materialised. Watching his dazzling ranks parade away to the south in their own dust and vanish into the forest like some alien marching machine, celebration died a grieving death in these people's dry throats. None thought they would ever see any of those brave men and women who had won them this miraculous reprieve again, and so this enduring silence was as profound as it was grave and painful.



Chapter Twenty-Two.

The fires were out finally, and the smoke which had been hanging over most of Breged like a black pall had eventually dissipated along with the fractious and war-torn atmosphere which had permeated the entire region. The *Aer y Derwydd* had retreated to the approbation of the druids and to the embrace of the country's motherland, and they had put to rest a now infamous triad of challenges. In their absence the heartlands of Breganta now looked strangely abandoned, and the crofts and farms lay in ruins where the fighting had been fiercest. The chain of command and the protocols of rule were once again established in Breged, but in the aftermath of the civil war across these midland territories, the federation itself was a dubious concept now at best. Cadallan and Iddel did their best to reignite the fires of allied cooperation and shared peace between the many tribes of Breged, but the damage had been done, and the wounds left were deep and still suppurated painfully. King Iddel now had legal and rightful possession of a new and replacement *llath y gallu gwyn*, this appropriately encapsulated by two silver eagles, and so the noble Iddel also held the rheolwr y grym over all the kingdoms of Breged. With the added military support of last year's pendragon and his elite Carfetau, many were hopeful for a peaceful and more lawful period ahead, as Iddel and his people of the tactful heart's justice system was feared and respected far and wide. King Alaric ap Guto of the Corieltaufi Newydd now governed southeastern Breged, and the relief from his rational, benevolent and supportive leadership was felt by all his subjects, made more acute by what horrors had come before. King Afyn's name and all reference to him were being deleted from their towns and villages in some celebration, and a festival atmosphere had permeated Tref Elsaforde and all its surrounding territories. Eidyn and Cydwas had been rescued as heroes from the *Tower of Bran*, as the Corionototau of that region had

swamped the caer in minutes of the unnerving blast from their horn, and both men were shaken and deafened for many hours after but unhurt by their experience. They were both men of status and honour in Corieltafora Newydd now, and they had both wisely relocated from counsel lead Breganta to Alaric's flourishing capital CaerElsaforde, and they never looked back. It was the werrin of Breged who brought life back to the land however, and it was their sweat which brought some form of unity back to their fractured and isolated communities as the harvest was upon them all. As annual, inter-tribal assistance in this frantic period had been so crucial for so many preceding generations and as cross-border trade was so vital to their survival, these pragmatic midland people soon had the old networks reconnected and their empty wagons rolling across the old borders in no time at all.

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The war council had not even ended, and yet the frantic sounds of hundreds of iron-shod feet had already begun to hammer the duck boards outside these pristine, white canvas pavilions. Caesar's legionaries had sprung into joyous action throughout this harbour fortress as soon as the order had been passed to pack everything up and that this invasion was finally over.

Almost three weeks had passed since they had defeated the Prittans at the ford on the Tamesa, but in all that time Caesar had been unable to bring the Prittans to further battle and to any decisive confrontation, as they had refused to form up in opposition and had just continued in their maddening harassment tactics. Hardly anything of value had been found on any of their travels, discovering one burning and abandoned, dirt poor village after another. Caesar's exasperation had come to the fore some time ago, and all knew that their general had become utterly bored with southern Prittan and his meaningless conquest of this empty land. His victory over a beaten, unwilling people had proved as hollow as the surrender offered by the duplicitous Trinovantan king and as useless as his comrade Commios, and so the writing had been on the wall for some

time. Although delighted, his officers had been surprised nonetheless at Caesar's sanguine acceptance of the situation, and his subsequent, significant decision to cancel his push south and west into the great lower peninsula of this country, where he had been assured lay a veritable treasure trove of tin, silver and gold mines. The fantastic and super valuable Prittanic pearls which Caesar craved were also to be found on the rugged coastlines of that great southwestern promontory from all reports, most of this intelligence gained by expert and unrestrained Roman torture and so they carried a healthy measure of credibility. Despite these accurate reports or perhaps due to others received, Caesar had issued the order to return to Gaul and to end this invasion of Prittain with surprising grace and unforeseen fortitude, as all had expected the general's infamous temper to emerge quickly on the heels of this familiar restlessness. Their general had become bored perhaps with these valueless southern territories that they had laboured across at such punishing cost. Caesar also doubted these rumours of western riches, or at least of finding and securing them, bringing into question perhaps their mercurial, even questionable gains in this war so far and any possible future profits. Many knew that the recent news of his daughter's death in childbirth weighed heavily on him, and the possible political ramifications of that particularly painful, personal tragedy could not be ignored. However, the general's attitude and deportment seemed unaffected, and Caesar was his usual, confident self this morning.

During the protracted review with all his officers earlier Caesar had given out his honours, and he had distributed these phalerae and torques for valour and noted military achievements himself, each confirmed for posterity by the scribes' waxed tablets. Centurion Marcus Cassius Scaeva of Caesar's glorious 10th was honoured with a gold torque for his inspirational courage and his valiant actions on the river Tamesa islet, and the huge man looked immensely pleased, as he had also found those auxiliaries who had deserted him that day and had personally hanged each one of them for their desertion in the face of the enemy. Regardless of this warrior's growing reputation, Scaeva was blushing deeply at the

applause and as he retook his place among the long line of centurions stood to *intente* against the white canvas. Military Tribune Quintus Laberius Durus who was killed leading the valiant defence of that temporary fortress on the red moor was honoured posthumously, and a sum was noted by a scribe on his waxed tablet to be sent to his family along with a solid silver phalerae from Caesar's own hand. Tribune Quintus Atrius was applauded and presented with a gold torque for his forthright defence of this primary, beachside fortress and their irreplaceable fleet, but ever a stickler for detail, Verus Lollius was posthumously *demoted* by Caesar. For disobeying orders, and for losing over a hundred cavalrymen and horses to the Prittans by his rash pursuit of the enemy on that bloody heath, an entry was made of the dead man's reduction and crime on the same scribe's waxed tablet. In Caesar's elite officers' council and in the more private debrief which followed this traditional and expected ritual with his men, their efforts of these past long and arduous weeks were put on the scales of inspection in full view of his officers, his patrician friends and colleagues with no detail hidden, as were all the latest reports and intelligences from Labienus across the channel. The *Pro's* list to continuing this war was shown to be virtually empty. Its one acquisitive entry was based on pure rumour and would take huge commitment, enormous endeavour and a great deal of luck to explore it properly, equal perhaps to that which they had already paid, and for naught it now seems. The now shelved expedition to discover these barbarians' pearls and their mineral deposits could have cost them a great deal more, everything in fact. It could also have made their fortunes and their legends; it was impossible to tell at this juncture. The *Con's* list however was a long and a sobering one, headed up by Caesar's own desire to end this war and signalled weeks previously perhaps when he had received King Avarway under truce and accepted his unreserved surrender, switching his tactics from the violent to the diplomatic. This was added to by Cassivellaunus' continued ability to threaten this fleet regardless of his reduced numbers, clearly evidenced by the touch-and-go defence of this fortress, which was now bursting to capacity and fraught

with closing activity. Caesar had become convinced that the Prittanic King Cassivellaunus and others of his ilk would always be able to gather enough warriors to keep assaulting him almost indefinitely, and his presence here was now virtually pointless. Julia's death had been a dreadful personal blow to him, but he had handled the news like the professional he was. Julia's recent death was something which could also impinge greatly on his political life however, threatening the triumvirate now that his association with Pompey was thus weakened. Next on this long list of expensive possibilities and potential calamities was news of the *confirmed* rebellion now growing in Gaul, which had swelled in his absence and had recently broken out into a costly and well-organised attack on his 14th in Eastern Belgica. There were rumours of a grieving Pompey or even Crassus heading for Gaul to put this rebellion down, and that could not happen. As this summer came to a historic end in isolated and worthless Prittain, the oncoming storms which this unfamiliar coast was known for were also a deep concern to Caesar and to all these men, as they had first-hand experience of how quickly the weather can turn at the rocky fringes of this wild and ungovernable land. Supporting all these concerns was the hunger now pinching the faces of Caesar's men, as food had become as scarce as anything of value in this now abandoned corner of Prittan. The meagre number of poor trinkets and the sacks of low quality grain which had been offered, along with the promise of future tribute from that vacillating King Avarway were as worthless as the skinny slaves he had sent him, and so any perceived *booty* played no part whatsoever in the general's thought processes. In truth, it was the rumoured arrival of one or both of those two dangerous and fatally ambitious Consuls in his conquered territories across the water which had concerned him the most, regardless of their declared triumvirate and shared goals. It was this clear and imminent threat to his governorship and standing in Gaul which had finally tipped the scales in favour of immediate departure and of a swift return to his continental duties.

The issuing of the general's orders to break camp and to prepare the fleet for the return voyage to Gaul had been received like a year's pay bonus

and a week's leave to his delighted soldiers. The drumming tempo of their caligae on the timber boards outside gave a crunching rhythm to their excited labours as they were finally going home, and their joy could not be concealed.

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Only one person was allowed to stand on that towering cliff to witness the departure of that great floating city of timber vessels, and which had assembled in the estuary below over the preceding days unmolested. Taking to sea, that foreign fleet had emptied from the great circular and lake-like fortress below like spawn from a round fish, and which looked now like a blue Brythonic shield from this high viewpoint. However, that flooded circular construction was regarded as a hideous scar on Prydein's beautiful landscape by this venerable man and all his countrymen. This learned man was King Iddel of the Cornafau Calon's arch-druid, and this tall and imperious looking priest was dressed in the ubiquitous flowing gown of his order's holy white linen, and his high forehead had been sharply tonsured for this performance as expected. Moreover, Gandwy had also been begrudgingly sheared of his long white beard and his impressive moustaches for this long-agreed appearance, and the similarity was stunning. From a distance, even the Brythons had shivered at that tall and imposing figure standing like a sentinel from the Underworld on the tallest peak of these dazzling white cliffs to silently watch Caesar's ignominious and penniless, repeated withdrawal. They had all sworn it was HênDdu himself, come back from his black throne in the Underworld to witness another shameful and defeated Roman departure. It was felt sure by all who watched wide eyed and breathless from these high trees that the Roman general himself could not fail to see Gandwy standing there glowering at him and would be forced to come to the same ominous conclusion. There seemed to be a ghostly, mocking laughter coming from somewhere along this rearing white coastline, but was it the multitude of contemptuous and hidden people watching from the trees laughing, the scornful wind, or was it the Gods themselves rocking in

mirth over their bone boards? One way or another and after so many generations, Cuneglas ap Marganus was victorious once more at bones, and many bets were settled in the Underworld and in this living one. The whole coast of Caint fell silent as Caesar's vast fleet began to blink out over that unnervingly straight line of the horizon, and it was as if the whole country had been holding its breath until it vanished. As the last ghostly glimmer disappeared and after but a moment's pause, people began emerging from the trees once more and back into the light. Within the hour, there were hundreds of people dismantling that great foreign fortress, and hundreds more children were scavenging the whole beach landing area in long lines across the bay. Anything they found of Roman origin was collected, from metal sandal studs and coins to brooches and weapons. All were cast into the sea after the departed enemy and in a final and scornful farewell to the murderous dogs of Rome. Finally, the bonfires were lit, the beer and the mead were brought out, and inside another hour the celebrations were loud, drunken but victorious. Regardless of any officially declared outcome of this war their revelry became raucous for they all felt like victors, as unlike the thousands of their fallen combrogi *they* at least were still alive.

That night around a blazing hearth fire and in a surprisingly undamaged CaerGwlyb, Caswallawn played *bones* absently with a senior gŵyr in his great hall, more to relax his furious mind than with any real desire to win. Any victory on *this* game board however beautifully made and expensive would pale into insignificance compared to what he had achieved on the game board of life in these recent weeks. He let the report he had just heard percolate, and he arranged his thoughts as this news which had so piqued his interest sank in, moving one of his pieces absently. That fool Commios had not sailed away with Afarwy and the yellow dog Caesar to the dubious security of Gallia, choosing instead to sneak back to his son's caer in Atrebata to Caswallawn's south, but he had not been nearly sneaky enough as one of Caswallawn's many spies had spotted him. Caswallawn shook his head at the man's foolishness again, and he grinned now at what he had just set in motion. He had entrusted one of

his most loyal gŵyr with a very secret mission and a long journey mere minutes earlier, furnishing him with the stamped authority and enough gold to see him to Khumry and across Essyllyria to Demeta. There, he was to seek out King Brithael at CaerMyrddin and to hand him Caswallawn's authority and his coin. Most of that gold would travel further west to the tip of that wild western peninsula and to CaerCleddau; the capital of the Wythonau. It was intended for one of its legendary inhabitants, and one of the wild Wythonau's unswerving assassins; a shadow-stalker would eventually be paid a lord's ransom in southern Brythonic gold for his covert assignment in Atrebata, and Caswallawn's smile became shark-like as he considered his next set of moves.



Chapter Twenty-Three.

Lughnas was ever the season for warfare, but it was too a time of profoundly serious religious celebration, and it was no different here on the frozen wastelands of highest Galedon. In DunTarwddu, perched on the topmost promontory of all Prydein it was especially so, and the hundreds of slaves in this monstrous black fortress were rushing about in last minute preparation for the great sacrificial ceremony which was to take place at midnight here tonight. The Gadwyr carry out their own inimitable annual festival of the dead at this vast citadel of theirs, and they have been preparing for weeks for this dark and portentous day and *their* sacred, unique and ancient rites of *aberth-bwyt*.

Cyrs had dreaded the coming of this morning for years, precisely eleven years to the day to be exact, and her fingers trembled as she prepared the *siot* for her daughter and her only child in their tiny kitchen. Their thatch had been draped in the black rags of this day, as was every other home in this village and many others huddled in this white, crystalline valley. Cyrs' anguish was shared equally by ten other mothers in these remote, freezing communities as their daughters too had been born at dawn on this fateful day, eleven years previously. Bel had just cleared Penrhyn Dunaed, glimmering over the looming peak of this infamous 'coast of the black bull', and *His* pale and pious light confirmed this significant new dawn and Cyrs' growing dread. It threw the stark and jagged palisades of that monstrous fortress on its crown into dark and sharp relief, signalling the beginning of this sacred and annual festival of the dead, here on the *arfordir y tarw ddu*. Even through the pain of Boredda's birth on that auspicious day, she had known that this emotionally fraught and present day was coming. There may be no grandchildren for Cyrs as she was a widow from the last war, and this could be her only child's last day in this cold and unrelenting world.

Eleven would go. Ten would return, and until that tortuous moment when the surviving girls returned to their homes, which were all bedecked in black flags for this most feared of days, none of the terrified women in them knew if they were still mothers. Throughout the towns and the tiny, huddled villages and isolated crofts of these deep highland valleys, any girls born among these frozen mountains on Lug Ddu's prophetic day would be marked by their priests. More than a decade later, they would be collected by the Gadwyr on this holy day and on the event of their eleventh birthday to be delivered to the priests at their temple in Tref Tarwddu, and these eleven little girls would sing merrily all the way. Once the druidens had confirmed their chastity, those eleven prepubescent acolytes would be sanctified, garlanded, and prayed over at the temple before the daylong observances and ceremonies to come. They would then process through the streets of the town, into the port and beyond, being praised by the werrin every step. These girls were adored, and showered with petals by their peers and by their families as they passed gracefully through these ice dusted lanes and cartways to each stopping station, where songs were sung and prayers were made at each small and flower adorned shrine. As night and the midnight hour approached, the eleven girls would climb the steep slopes of Penrhyn Dunaed and head in their ponderous but happy way to the monstrous, open gates of that black flagged fortress on its crown.

Following a whole day of prayer and ancient ritual and surrounded now by a protective ring of druids and druidens, today's eleven virgin girls, including Boreda processed sedately to that great fortress on the promontory for the sacrificial ceremony this freezing night, and the sombre werrin of these villages had all turned out to watch them go under the prophetic stars of this hallowed event. In stark contrast to the ebullient mood of these choral girls who had sung their hearts out as they processed into the town this morning, they were silent as they trod uphill hand in hand now, and these sombre spectators watched them pass in apprehensive and tearful silence.

The great hall of GrutArd was seething with its fiery haired and hugely muscled warriors, and the atmosphere was fraught, the many spirits and ghosts of this great hall seeming to gather under its vast thatched roof as their priests approached this year's point of selection. The robust and basic looking furniture laid out in aisles under this impressive roof had been fashioned long ages ago from crudely dressed timber. Although large and stout enough to support these long rows of monstrous men at their repast, the furniture they sat on spanned the whole width of this stone-built hall and the full length of its impressive, vaulted thatch. All these benched tables were deeply scarred and stained from their great age, but there was not one empty seat among them this hugely important night. High above them, but below the criss-crossing and angular puzzle of roof posts, a long line of foot square niches had been let into that high stonework, and they stretched all the way around the tops of all four walls in this hall. Residing in each little alcove was the head of the chosen sacrificial offering, taken at each of Lug's annual nights of dark and mysterious celebration. Last year's contributor was perched high in the southwestern corner, and she still looked in fair condition although slightly yellowed, but the long row of her predecessors lying in varying states of corruption, counted back the years with deepening degrees of decay within each small niche. The sixty-five heads of all these girls although moved along one niche at the denouement of each year's festival, the older ones were saved the final and sad vestiges of putrefaction as they had become cured by the perpetual smoke in this hall, and the split skin on their faces had taken on the aspect of smoked bacon. The last and final one in the row had lived alongside the first, and both were situated above the large and deeply carved *solar-wheel* stone over the huge entrance. The last had been removed earlier by the stewards of this fortress, and that sixty-five-year-old sacrifice had been interred in a beautifully embossed and spruce lined bronze box in all due honour and ceremony this afternoon and in the huge graveyard outside. Those same stewards had then carefully and reverentially shifted each head along one space using their tall ladders, to make room for the latest in this high row of

sixty-six girl's heads for tonight's forthcoming contributor. Her niche was the empty one on the right above the solar cross stone and the huge entrance to this hall, and it sat alongside the current eldest member of her sisterhood who had just arrived. That revered and now spiritual, seventy-six-year-old virgin of the Gadwyr was only thirteen months now from her release and from finding her own awen. The sixty-six sacred virgins will be a complete and sacred sisterhood once more at midnight tonight precisely and it was a vital procedure to these Gadwyr. In stark contrast to these lifeless and gruesome faces looking down at them all, in the centre of this crowded great hall, the bright, vibrant and innocent young faces of *this* Lughnas' chosen eleven glowed in this flickering firelight. All eleven were swathed in white linen and were standing barefoot, gathered in a big circle on the stone flags and before the ranks of these huge warriors. Their long plaits of golden red hair were still adorned with the tiny wildflowers which endure in these frozen wastelands, and these girls were praying before the huge, redolent 'bull altar' of GrutArd now and on their knees.

At the resonating sound of a huge bronze and deeply embossed gong suspended behind the altar at the head of this huge building, a wild looking druid in a black fur *birra* led a blind and aged, beardless uati by the elbow from this huge smoking edifice draped in hide and horn. The druid led this incredibly old looking priest in a smaller circle behind these kneeling acolytes before their gigantic altar, and this strangely genderless creature's eyes were two orbs of milky-white blankness. No one could tell now whether this limping ancient was a man or woman in its prime, but whatever sex it had once been it was now neither as the creature was long past matters of the body, and it seemed to cling precariously to its barely flickering life. This withered, androgynous high priest of the Gadwyr was a far-seeing devotee of the immortal giant himself; GrutArd, and this geriatric priest was reputed to be one hundred and forty-two years old. This crippled elder shuffled forward in this supported way, describing a stuttering circle on the cold stone flags behind these kneeling girls and moaning softly with each painful step. Its deeply wrinkled and liver

spotted head with its threads of white hair weaved from side to side until this walking uati cadaver came to a juddering halt on its swollen knees. The moaning rose ominously from the toothless pink maw of its dribbling mouth as once more the dread God of the bull had chosen. Boredda was raised from her knees with a deep and respectful smile and then led to the altar as her young sisters peeled the sacred circle apart behind her. They drew to the sides in worshipful witness as the *dewis*; the 'choosing' was over. Ardauc *Ynfyd* in his black hooded cloak of fur, belted with the cured intestine of a wild boar looked as feral as the animal which had given up its guts to the priest just to keep his clothing together. The grey hair on this shaman's scrawny head and on his face was a mat of crawling filth, and the patches of bare, wrinkled and grime smeared skin of ages on his angular face were frequently visited by those same permanent and parasitical tenants. The tiny bones of rodents and birds were woven into this greasy mess, and the woollen mantle under his reeking fur was encrusted with grime. The stench of human filth and rotting death coming from this terrifying human assaulted all these girls in suffocating waves, but for Boredda it must have been overpowering. With the moaning and dribbling uati skeleton witnessing all from one side of this tableaux with his unseeing and blank eyes, Ardauc took the polished stone blade from the truly ancient altar behind him now in his claw-like and filthy fingers. With his long and encrusted fingernails curling around the hemp grip, Ardauc the 'insane' turned to beautiful Boredda on her knees before him. She smiled back up at this obnoxious creature and with the utmost love and reverence. The light of spiritual, self-deleting sacrifice burned deeply in those lovely eyes, and which had clearly expected her *dewis* here today, as Boredda had seen it repeatedly in her dreams and for all her young life. She had been emotionally preparing herself, and spiritually charging herself for this sacred procedure for as long as she could remember, and now she was ready. In fact, Boredda had never been readier for anything, and her smile deepened then despite the reeking foulness which assaulted her nostrils. The gong behind the altar sounded loud into this hall as the stars aligned and midnight fell across this

highland region without a sound, and Boreda closed her eyes as Ardauc, her revered priest leaned forward to accept her votive devotion.

The stewards threaded themselves between these long and sombre rows of silent warriors now, all hulking over their benched tables in deep thought and quiet appreciation. The actual procedure of *aberth-bwyt* was about to commence, and these solemn stewards distributed the offering among all these gigantic warriors on small silver salvers. Young Boreda had graced this vital and annual ceremony with her elfin like, almost translucent beauty, and she had given up the sum total of her eleven years of life for these irreplaceable men, here tonight and on this memorable occasion. Boreda had done this for the continuance and spiritual protection of the mighty Gadwyr, and once her spirit had left her body on this redolent altar to seek out the Underworld, it had been carried away and over the bridge of swords in all honour by the bull of GrutArd himself. Boreda's head had been reverentially removed for display in an adjoined chamber for just this purpose by Ardauc, and there, her fragrant and oil anointed and prepared body had been threaded onto the long dog-iron by the priest and two strong stewards. The task was hard on the eye and on the soul, but it was soon done, and her tightly trussed and glistening carcass had been brought out into the hall to much prayer and chanting from these priests and their huge men. Her body had then revolved on the iron for the correctly appointed time in the great fireplace of this huge hall, and none of these men were allowed to take their eyes off this procedure for a moment, done for their sakes and in GrutArd's name, but also honouring the implacable *Dark Lord* of Prydein himself on his day of honour; Arglwydd Lug Ddu. Amid the sizzling and the spitting from their slowly revolving sacrifice in the fireplace, the persistent droning of the watching black druids along with the sibilant noises which ushered from their fur clad uati got louder, and all these priests were huddled around their barely alive and blind leader by GrutArd's monstrously horned altar, counting down the moments. Each warrior who took a small part of Boreda's now deeply sacred flesh in this 'sacrificial eating' was gratified and immensely relieved, as the rites were always fraught with

difficulty. Their eminent high priests had steered them through this challenging and harrowing ordeal without pause or error once more, and this relief was felt by all. Boredda's pretty head now lay in everlasting honour in the last and latest niche high above the huge arched entrance to this hall. With the ancient, wheeled cross of their predecessors carved into the stone below it and over the door, this latest addition and all her sisters were utterly sacred to these thoughtful men. With her brushed and corn yellow hair gathered around her beautiful, still smiling face, Boredda beamed her blessings down on them all from the head of her once again completed sisterhood; these sixty-six spiritual virgins of the Gadwyr. Gŵyr Brith Fawr had climbed the ladder and had placed her there himself in all due deference and solemn honour, his granite features betraying the emotions he felt at the unparalleled gift from this local little girl. Boredda had been familiar to him as was her mother, and it would be Brith who would break the news to Cyrs in the morning long before the ten remaining girls were released.

Several hours after the silver sacrificial dishes had been cleared away and the seemingly endless prayers to GrutArd and to Lug Ddu *through* Boredda were over, these warriors looked forward to tonight's most anticipated part of Lug Ddu and GrutArd's night of celebrated worship. It took the form of the death-duel of *sicrhad*, and all these men waited eagerly for it to begin, as it was always of great spectacle and there was always much coin wagered on the outcome. A priest was stationed atop this dun's tallest watchtower as they waited, looking up to the sky and huddled around a brazier from the deadly cold. When GrutArd's own star appeared in its eternal place in the infinite firmament above but in a slightly different position each successive year, this freezing druid would scamper gratefully down the long spiral staircase and hurry back to this great hall with the news.

All had been prepared, and the two chosen warriors for tonight's *sicrhad* took their positions on the cold flags of this hall, and within the great space which had been allocated for this hugely popular event more

centuries past than anyone here could guess at. Both combatants lay down on their backs with their feet toward each other, and with a ten-reed space left between them on the floor. Two solar crosses carved deeply into the truly ancient original flagstones of this floor marked the position for each man's head, whilst a large, wheeled and flaming solar cross denoted the centre of the ten-step space between the opposing soles of their feet. Centrally placed over the worn and chipped, wheeled fire-cross symbol at the centre of the ground between them was a double headed war axe of the Gadwyr, and the first to spring up and get to it would undoubtedly have the advantage. Both these young men waited on their heels, their elbows, their shoulder blades and on the palms of their hands, staring up at the massive roof above them and nervously awaiting the signal. These two young men were set like set traps, tense and on the trembling point of exploding into action. They were not really seeing the puzzle of dark roof joists above them or the dense but grey, moss splashed old thatching held up by them, as their minds were consumed with what was about to ensue and both young men were looking entirely inwards. The moments dragged themselves inexorably along like the limping ancient of the uati, who looked on but saw nothing of this secular event from the altar with his milky and dead eyes. The *tap tapping* of the lookout priest's sandals was soon heard coming down the long stone passageway over their murmuring, and the tension rose noticeably in this great hall as the moment was clearly at hand. A woollen wrapped and shivering druid entered through the priest's door in a flurry of snow, and he nodded to Ardauc *Ynfyd* standing before GrutArd's horned and monstrous altar. Slamming the oak door behind him and against the howling snowstorm outside, this skinny and grey-haired priest went to find his place among his peers with a loud sniff, clearly relieved by the warmth of the roaring fire, a horn of hot mead and his brothers' welcome. The wild looking Ardauc picked up a long and bulbous stick from the altar and turned to the great round, bronze gong suspended behind it on its iron chains. This huge gong had the snarling face and head of an enraged bull deeply embossed into it, bulging out from its ancient and pitted surface

horns and all, and it caught the flickering light in this hall with its malevolent coppery glare. Every soul in this great hall tensed, their eyes glued to the two men vibrating on their backs at its centre and awaiting the call to immediate combat. All here knew the axe-dual was a choice, and it always has been. 'Go for the man, or go for the clear advantage of the weapon?' This ancient and imperative question of victory and survival had been pondered and played out in this unforgiving citadel, four times a year and at each of the holy festivals. This has gone on for as long as anyone can remember, even Prydein's bards, and many wagers were taken among these tense and excited benches tonight for this notable and long-awaited event.

Glannach and Guoremor were both seventeen years of age and had trained among these Gadwyr warriors for ten long and challenging, almost unbelievable years. They looked like no other seventeen-year-olds anywhere in Prydein however, as this pair of still maturing men were huge and muscular young warriors of immense stature already. They were both this night facing their *sicrhad*, and they had been preparing themselves for weeks for this deadly rite of 'confirmation'. Only half-tattooed at this stage, one will perish here tonight, but the victor will be entered onto the sacred lists to become an honoured and assured Gadwyr warrior, receiving the balance of the total body, deeply sacred tribal tattoos of honour. Their careers would begin properly this night with the killing of the other, and both men wanted the tattoos and everything that came with them so badly, they shuddered on their heels, their hands, elbows and the tips of their shoulder blades now with an almost unbearable tension of expectancy. Each man was like a set beartrap trembling in anticipation and prepared for explosive, instant action. Ardauc *Ynfyd* struck the huge bull gong behind him, and the duel began in a flash to this haunting, vibrating tone. Both men detonated from the ground, turning in a blink onto hands and feet, and then spinning around quickly to face each other. Then they ran at each other. The watching Gadwyr all drew breath, as finally and after so much waiting the gambit was upon them.

Glannach decided for the weapon as he was noted for his excellence with a battle-axe, ready to swat his opponent's hand from it at the last second, but Guoremor had his own plan, and as both of these huge and furious men reached the centre, they were almost sprinting at each other. Guoremor faked a grab for the axe but went for Glannach's throat like a snake, and with an almighty crash, these two men collided with each other in the middle of this animated great hall. Glannach's fingers closed around the haft of the axe, but his opponent had his muscular arm around his neck in a flash and rolled with him, tightening his grip and dragging him away. The polished wood slipped from Glannach's grasping fingertips, and the axe clattered the cold wheeled fire-cross stone of DunTarwddu decisively. Both men were suddenly rolling about on these flags and wrestling for their lives, and a great roar erupted from the watching Gadwyr. Guoremor would not relinquish his fearsome grip around his opponent's neck, and using his great strength, he forced his hand around the back of Glannach's head, gripped his opposing forearm and locked in the triangular stranglehold. Glannach kicked and bucked like a trapped animal, thrashing around in an attempt to break Guoremor's deadly armbar, but the champion wrestler threw his powerful legs around this infamous axe-man's waist to control him. With the leverage of his other arm and with another great gasping breath, Guoremor began to compress his young but bulging muscles. The fight was immense, as both warriors fought and struggled against each other with all they had still, but the watching Gadwyr knew Guoremor had a deadly advantage, and half of their numbers' heads dropped. The other half of the observing Gadwyr looked entirely cheerful and a little smug as it was obvious to all that GrutArd had decided *against* the axe this night, and their monstrous God had also decided where the winnings would go. All were compelled to watch however, and in a few more furious moments on the hard floor in front of them, Glannach's struggling began to abate, but Guoremor still clung on for dear life as he was not going to give up now. His opponent's purple face began to bloat as he gargled and choked in Guoremor's powerful and vicelike grip, held tight around his swelling throat. They

thrashed wildly on these ancient and long bloodied flagstones, mottled brown now from their inestimable age, and from the uncountable teenagers who had died on them in the past and in far bloodier circumstance. Glannach's swollen tongue began to protrude between blue lips and from his bared teeth, but on his back Guoremor squeezed with all his might still. With a loud '*crack*', Glannach's neck snapped and he slumped in Guoremor's bulging arms. As the great hall of DunTarwddu erupted to deafening cheering and the banging of big wooden beer logs on these rough tables, a flushed and panting Guoremor released his ferocious grip on his defeated combrogi and rolled away, gasping for breath on his back and with his bare, muscular chest pumping like a set of bellows. Wooden mugs flew across this hall, and the beer suds splashed everywhere as pandemonium ensued in DunTarwddu, and even the thick oaken rafters above were shaking. Gŵyr Brith Fawr stepped up amid this bedlam and grabbed Guoremor's outstretched forearm, restoring him to tumultuous applause whereupon a gold coin was pressed into his sweaty palm by this monstrous chieftain and he was instructed to sit with the men, who were roaring loudly and pounding the furniture with their great fists. The rows of similarly half-inked, untested young men to one side of this hall looked on in envy as Guoremor took his seat of honour among the veterans, and the Gadwyr crashed the tables with their logs and with their fists in warm and beery welcome to the newest of their young warriors. Some of the candidates who would be fighting this duel on the next holy festival looked on with concealed emotions as the limp body of the defeated Glannach was hauled out before them. His lifeless carcass was dragged out and toward the back door by two burly stewards with his swollen and purple head dangling and bumping along at a strange angle. Imbolc was only three months hence, and it did not seem that far away to some of these pale young men.

As this night of celebration to the Gadwyr's black God continued into the early hours, all were compelled from time to time to look up to Boredda's eternally happy and graceful face above that sacred symbol and the huge arched doorway to this hall, and they would toast her and her eldest sister

there solemnly if not a little drunkenly. They acknowledged her glorious contribution to their lives and to the continuation of their very existence, and this will go on until the sun comes up and will at each annual event unto the very end of days. Boredda's face still bore the ecstatic and deeply spiritual acceptance she had felt when the chipped edge of Ardauc's ancient stone knife had taken her young life, and it had moved all these huge men of iron. Hundreds of toasts were raised to her beautiful head throughout the night, ensconced high in the rafters and looking over them all with the promise of her eternal benefaction. Over the impending years, that little girl will feel truly adored for her ultimate sacrifice among the steadily shifting number of her ghostly sisterhood, and over the coming centuries which approach inexorably and endlessly in series, her status in the Underworld will be forever confirmed.

In the icy and glassy light of the following morning, a foreign fleet of ships was revealed in the frigid docks of Porth Tarwddu, and they had achieved what so much in this hard life could not. Their startling arrival, the vibrant, garish colours of their sails and their outlandish silhouettes had drawn every soul out of their warm thatches, their turf cwts and into the freezing outdoors to stare at them agog, which was no mean feat. This bizarre fleet had somehow survived the tail of the great storm which had just passed over the head of this country, and it no doubt frantically sought out the sanctuary of this most northern port in all mainland Prydein crouched atop this wild and rugged, deeply inhospitable coastline. It became quickly apparent that their arrival was far from an enforced search for sanctuary however, as Porth Tarwddu had been their intended destination, to all the woollen clad and local observers' overwhelming surprise. These were by far the strangest and the most alien looking ships these hardy northern werrin had ever seen, even in their wildest dreams, and they filled this wide but white and rocky anchorage with their lurid colours. The prows of these huge vessels were carved and monstrous protrusions of dark, unknown timbers, and their tall masts were in all the wrong places. The frosty sails hanging from them were oddly shaped and wildly striped in vivid reds and golds, and the intricate, glistening and weblike network of

rigging fastened to them made no sense whatsoever to the watching sailors among the huddled werrin on these frozen wharves. The crews of these dozen monstrous ships were brown skinned, black eyed and dressed in the most outlandish garb to a man and with what looked like brightly coloured bandages wound around their oaken heads. Their captains and officers were all dressed in fur, but every man aboard these huge ships shivered visibly as they waited despite the rows of burning braziers on their glistening decks. The gossip in the harbour and both taverns, which these foreigners studiously avoided was like that mythical, unknown thing in these ice-locked lands; *wildfire*, and before the morning was out, the excited werrin of *arfordir y tarw ddu* knew everything. Their Gadwyr were going to war, abroad.

Those who have family members among the southwestern tribe of the Creuonau, whose lands lay close to the people of the Western Isles all knew of a great and powerfully brewing secret. They possessed knowledge of a particularly important, shortly impending event in those wild western parts, and they had been eager to share this grave and momentous news with their northern combrogi. In view of these hot and persistent rumours, those with wider viewpoints and some knowledge of national military and political diplomacy saw perhaps a subtler reason for the Gadwyr to be on foreign sojourn in the weeks to come. All these people knew too however that the Persians' gold was famously pure, and that the Gadwyr did love that bright and indestructible, buttery yellow metal above all else, except perhaps for war. These wealthy and long travelled foreigners were here to collect all their battle ready Gadwyr apparently, and which amounted to three thousand of their mighty and unbeaten warriors. Gossip throughout the town and its taverns would have it that those legendary men were wanted for a mercenary mission in the war raging in these people's far distant homeland, and they would earn their huge chieftain's weight in pure gold for their service, but as nobody could understand any of the crews' indecipherable babbling, it was all conjecture.

As Bel threw his wan, powerless light onto these woollen swathed people and their colourful visitors, making the elm planking underfoot and the frozen rigging on these foreign ships sparkle, an icy wind blew in from the vast northern ocean. It ruffled the heavy, frost laden and luridly striped sails of these deeply unfamiliar vessels, and below them the fur clad captains and all their black skinned sailors were visibly quaking with the cold from this northerly blast. They would not have to wait and suffer much longer however, as the mighty yet distant Gadwyr had finally made their appearance. Led by Gŵyr Brith Fawr and a younger, much slimmer, half-tattooed warrior and showing no outward sign of their long night of celebration nor the freshness of this consecrated morning, they were descending the slopes of Penrhyn Dunaed en masse, in their shirtsleeves and grinning fit to bust. As the mighty Gadwyr of northern Galedon trotted down the ice crusted lane to this freezing port, obviously in great spirits, it was clear to everyone watching in awe that they were all armed to the teeth and ready for absolutely anything.

* * * * *

“Have you seen Brast?” Cadwy asked Hefin, tense and clearly unhappy at the delay, but Hefin shook his head in response and curled his lip.

“Have you tried his thatch in the town?” His combrogi offered with a smile, knowing the stress of impending fatherhood was weighing heavily on Cadwy in these final hours.

“Brast has a house in town?” Cadwy queried with a slight frown, as it was news to him.

“Mm yes, I thought you knew. He shares it with an exceptionally fine lady called Siân, you know the titled lady who makes our coats and waterproof capes?” Hefin informed him with a sparkle in his eye, pleased he had something to distract Cadwy with.

“Siân *Gwniyyddes*? Yes of course I know her, but how on earth did Brast manage to secure that particular lady’s affections?” Cadwy inquired of his

first cousin and best friend with raised eyebrows. "I would have thought that she was a little aristocratic for our good Brast ap Bwlch, and perhaps a little young for our growling old wardog?" Cadwy finished thoughtfully, but with a grin breaking out on his face and for the first time in many days.

"You know Brast, now he's a lord there's no stopping him!" Hefin chuckled in answer. "Siân is certainly all woman though, so you have to admire his courage Cadwy, and he has lost a little weight recently which isn't a bad thing." Hefin added with a smirk, making Cadwy laugh.

"That's all very well Hefin my combrogi, and Brast's ambition and his recent fitness is perhaps to be admired, but he is listed as being on active duty as-per the day's roster, is he not?" Cadwy did not even wait for a reply, reaching for one of the aforementioned Lady Siân's fine overcoats, and Hefin stood to join him. "I think we should pay him a visit don't you Hefin? Let us see what our ennobled combrogi is up to in this secret town house of his!" Cadwy growled, and that sharklike smile which Hefin knew so well promised some fine entertainment, and he would not miss whatever was about to unfold for the world. He scuttled after Cadwy out of his private lodges and followed him down the spiral staircase with a matching grin.

Cadwy had only knocked once, when the newly painted door in this pretty thatch off *stryd fawr* of Draenwen was opened and by a tall and statuesque woman of around thirty summers. She stood smiling in the doorway and between an overflowing pair of bloom filled hanging baskets, making quite an impression on both young men.

"Lady Siân *Gwniyddes*?" Cadwy enquired politely and with a respectful bow, whilst a grinning Hefin did the same alongside him. This lady's remarkable eyes grew as recognition instantly blossomed in their blue depths. This lady was no shrinking violet however, and she covered her surprise at such unannounced and royal company with a very attractive and an engaging smile, showing perfect white teeth.

“Your royal highness Prince Cadwy and your highness Prince Hefin, it is a great honour to receive you in my home. Brast has told me so much about you both!” She informed them with an unfathomable look on her attractive face, and then bowed deeply to both men. “Please do come in and make yourselves to home!” She smiled at them, standing aside with the open hand of welcome. Both men understood completely Brast’s fascination with this tall and beautiful lady as they stepped over the threshold and entered her home. Siân *Gwniyyddes* seemed to exude a femininity and a regal grace unmatched by any of her contemporaries in this little town as she greeted them both.

“Let me fetch you both some mead my lords, and I will let Brast know you are here.” Siân smiled and bowed again to them both, and they returned her bows with deep ones of their own.

Their glamorous hostess retreated to her well organised kitchen, and both young men were compelled to watch her swaying departure before then eyeing each other in surprise. A loud crash of something getting knocked over and which did not bounce came from behind a screened off chamber at the back of this long oval thatch. It made both visitors grin, as their abrupt arrival was clearly causing some consternation to this lady’s unseen partner. The bead curtain was swept aside abruptly, and Gŵyr Brast came forward to greet them, blushing furiously as his dishevelled hair and the soft woollen dressing gown were evidence enough of his impromptu stand easy. Before he could bow and offer his formal greeting to both princes, Cadwy forestalled him.

“Ah Gŵyr Brast, I’ve been looking for you!” Cadwy informed him with that enigmatic smile the major had come to know so well, stepping up to him, and Brast could not meet his prince’s eyes, shuffling his feet on the doeskin flooring in acute discomfort. “Nothing of any great import, but as you are declared on active duty by the roster I sought you out in the barracks but to no avail. I didn’t know you had vacated your billet in my caer without my knowledge and had taken up residence in town?” He challenged Brast politely, but there was an edge to his voice now, which

although subtle was discernible to both male listeners. Although Brast had not strictly needed Cadwy's permission to take up residence here with this lady, it would have been polite perhaps to have let him know directly that he had permanently vacated his barracks and to not let him hear about it through a third party.

"I er, yes. We have..."

"I see, I see!" Cadwy interrupted him mercilessly, beginning to walk around this pleasant thatch and to take in its spacious interior as Brast, with his hair sticking up everywhere in untidy clumps stood involuntarily to attention in his woolly dressing gown and his sheepskin slippers. Cadwy swept his gaze around this tidy and vibrant interior which reflected their hostess' warm and friendly personality, and it was clear too with barely a glance that this homestead accommodated two people. More than that, it was evident to Cadwy that its occupants were obviously residing here as a couple. "You kept all this under your helmet you old rogue!" Cadwy growled at Brast and with that canine grin as he drew alongside him again. Brast responded with one of his own, still blushing and clearly unable to hide his pride. His quiet smugness was interrupted by his lady, as Siân returned from her kitchen carrying a tray laden with steaming mead and a plateful of her own delicious-looking butter biscuits. The mouth-watering biscuits caught Hefin's eye, but Cadwy held Brast's gaze in his own with no compassion, his expression unreadable still, and Brast was compelled to shuffle his slippered feet again as Siân joined them. "You have kept the big day a total secret too Brast, and your humble modesty does you proud, but if I'm not mistaken, I'm betting the good Lady Siân would like to make a *grand* day of it?" Cadwy enquired of them both directly, quite casually and out of the blue, accepting the horn of mead from his surprised hostess expressionless. Brast suddenly looked as if he had been shot through with an arrow, whilst Hefin alongside him looked just as shocked, and strangely guilty as if it was he who had shot him. Hefin gulped with a dawning realisation, and then his eyes grew wider. Barely suppressing his mirth, he watched Brast blush to his roots

alongside him and to stand open mouthed at his prince's presumptive but painfully incisive question. The Lady Siân in comparison was as quick as a whip, and she knew immediately what her royal visitor was about, adopting a questioning look herself, and appraising her co-habiting partner now with an arched and beautifully plucked eyebrow. Brast blustered something unintelligible under this cold and unavoidable scrutiny, but then he ran out of steam and ideas both, to just stand there looking at Cadwy and Siân like a rabbit caught in a hunter's torchlight. Cadwy was without mercy still, and so he took the lady's hand, leading her to the cushioned bench against the brightly coloured eastern wall of her own living room and with the utmost courtesy. "You must let me introduce you to my amazing *gwraig y let* Lydia Lady Siân, as she has organised so many wonderful handfastings she could do it blindfold I'm sure. My wife Princess Eirwen will also be sure to want the celebration in the great hall of my caer, and I too would be most honoured to accommodate you for the happy event!" Cadwy beamed at her, and then he turned back to the two men watching, who were clearly gripped by precisely opposing emotions. A bulging, bug eyed Hefin looked as though he was about to explode into an apoplectic fit of laughter, whilst a wide eyed and crumbling Brast seemed to be gripped by some frantic but silent seizure alongside him, which for some unknown reason forced the poor man to flap his fingers about in acute discomfort. Cadwy completely ignored Brast's furious gesticulations, and with that predatory grin of his, he turned back to his hostess and became effusive once more in his generosity to the Lady Siân beside him, assisting her gallantly to sit on her own sofa before sitting down next to her with an expectant look on his rugged face, and it was Hefin who broke first. He could not hold it in a moment longer, and he duly exploded into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, falling to the hide matting and rolling about on Lady Siân's floor, hooting and choking and pointing up at Brast, who glowed red like a forge fire above him. Cadwy and Siân looked on with cool expressions from this beautifully upholstered lounge, but they could not hold the façade for much longer either. Hefin's irrepressible laughter was as infectious as

snake venom, and in a flash they were all laughing. The tears rolled down their faces, including Brast ap Bwlch's, who to his credit nodded and moved to his Lady Siân, put his arm around her shoulders and grinned fit to bust from his red face.

"I can't have one of my most senior gŵyr running around like an uncivilised soldier can I Brast? Especially as I have set aside some land for you to the north." Cadwy pointed out casually from this lovely sofa, inspecting his fingernails and crossing his legs as he relaxed into its cushioned embrace, and Brast's open mouth shut with an astonished snap of his teeth. Cadwy glanced up at him and smiled again. "Yes, that abandoned farm estate above Bryn Collen; the one I've seen you visit often. It needs governance Brast if it is ever to recover and to begin feeding our people again, and I thought you could do with a new challenge!" He informed his senior gŵyr quite nonchalantly, and who suddenly looked as though he had just swallowed an egg as the ramifications of the prince's easily spoken words could not be overlooked. Prince Cadwy was elevating Gŵyr Brast ap Bwlch again, this time to a *landed* tumon, and Brast had to sit down at this point. Even the erudite Lady Siân looked shocked and robbed of words sitting next to Cadwy at this life changing event, and her tears demonstrated that the gravitas of today's events were suddenly as clear to her as they were to her stunned partner. "What about Beltain? You can't beat a spring wedding!" Cadwy broke the stunned silence with an ever-broader grin, turning to his shaken hostess on this couch. "Anyway, whatever you both decide will be fine with us all I'm sure, but please let me know, as quite a few of us will need new coats for the occasion!" He winked at Siân, and the laughter came back, naturally now and with a decidedly happy ring to it.

Barely an hour later and high in the private royal lodges of CaerCarwyn's western corner tower its ruling tywysog had returned, as had his anxieties. The lines of concern on Cadwy's face now competed with the ungainly scar across his forehead, and he found it almost impossible to keep still. He sat fidgeting in his armchair by the window and was

compelled to chew on his already ragged fingernails. Lydia was *in* with Eirwen, as were several nurses and experienced midwives and they were all sure that it would be soon. Eirwen had been in labour these last twelve hours, and Cadwy had trod the passages and hallways of CaerCarwyn like a caged beast through each of them. Blindly pacing out the moments and the minutes within each tortuous hour through these corridors and empty chambers, it was only Hefin who was able to approach him without incurring any serious and lasting injury. They had both taken a chance at a few hours hunting in Coedwig Collen earlier, and the break would have taken Cadwy's mind off the looming event admirably. They had just entered Cwm Collen on the spoor of a family of wild boar however when a rider had caught up with them, effectively ending the all-too-short hunt before it had even begun. Then it had been a frantic dash back to this caer as fast as their chargers could carry them, and Cadwy had stalked these corridors the same way ever since; with the murderous step of a deadly hunter.

The tension in the adjacent birthing chamber could be felt through that oak door, or at least it could to Cadwy's feverish imagination, and he fondled a gangly but adorable puppy now as he waited in his agony and his longing in this chair by the fire. It was a pale, long legged and shaggy hunt hound of around eight weeks old which distracted him, and this agreeable puppy had been sent north with a trading caravan, all the way from Khumry and at the behest of that maternal country's high king; Lludd Llaw Ereint. The hound was only recently whelped, and its grey-white coat was already tough and springy, ideal for the physical challenges of the uniquely privileged hunting life ahead of it. It would not however suffer the punishing life of the hunting dogs of the werrin who had to earn their meagre keep day after day. No, this lucky pup will sojourn on the occasional aristocratic hunt in fine style and unhurried pleasure. The rest of this long-legged dog's fortunate life will be filled by being the adoration of his mistress, who was missing this day, but this little puppy knew none of this and was happy having his long and sculpted belly tickled by Cadwy. Curiously and uniquely to the hunting dogs of the Khumry, *Llew* had rusty

red tips to his pointed ears, one of which would stand pricked whilst the other flopped and flapped as carelessly as its entirely demented owner, wriggling furiously now in its master's lap and demanding his undivided attention. Infant screaming suddenly punctured the air and punctuated his thoughts just as effectively, making Cadwy's eyes fly open. He stood up abruptly and returned *Llew* to his stout timber pen in a daze, but then did not have a clue what to do, and he just stood there in the middle of this antechamber glowing and grinning fit to bust, staring at that door. His ears were straining to hear more staccato screaming from *Olwydd ap Cadwy* in the berthing room next door and over the whining of the now abandoned and forgotten dog. Hefin came bursting through the outer door with Hefin, Brast and Bleddyn at his heels, and they all stood there with the most stunned expressions on their faces as another concussive volley of screaming erupted from beyond *that* door. None of them knew what to do next, and a frisson of panicky emotion swept through the four of them. Long, agonising moments later, the door to the bed chamber opened and a smiling Lydia held it open. Cadwy just beat Hefin through this narrow doorway, and he rushed to the bedside with Brast and Bleddyn in hot pursuit.

Gripping Eirwen's hand and staring into those eyes and her smiling face, Cadwy knew all he needed to know in that instant, and it will always be that way between them. Cadwy turned, and there in the midwife's bloody hands was his son and heir, and he felt his very soul soar into the heavens at that enervating and lifechanging moment. Olwydd's indignant little face was deeply wrinkled and purple in protest, and he was squealing with his anger at such rude and undignified treatment. Cadwy simply glowed with an incomparable pride, and still in a daze he reached for him, his eyes glistening and his heart banging in his chest.

"My son. Olwydd ap Cadwy ap Cridas ap Calgorad ap Calgus Fawr of Selgofa and Albion!" He growled with the overwhelming emotion as he gave his son full title for the first time, a look of wonder now on his face

and as the nurse handed over the warm and squealing baby in its first swaddling, but she did this with a smirk.

“You may have to revise that statement darling.” Eirwen told him laconically, watching him closely and from one elbow on her temporary bed.

Cadwy was hardly listening, as he was staring deeply into his son’s eyes, and all the things he planned for this fortunate young boy were written across his awestruck face at that unique and life enduring, *first* moment between father and son.

“How so my love?” He asked her absently, utterly lost in the perfect beauty of his son’s flawless little face. “Isn’t he just adorable?” He asked them all in a daze, looking deep into his son’s baby blue eyes at that moment. Eirwen, Lydia and all these nurses chuckled in response, and Cadwy looked up at them with that starstruck expression still softening his scarred and normally warlike features. His eyes were filled now with a new and undiscovered paternal love which was suddenly so powerful, Cadwy could hardly draw breath. “Olwydd!” He cooed, lifting the child in its swaddling and looking back into his beautiful and sparkling eyes, and his indulgent smile deepened.

“Just too adorable Cadwy, but our first child will need to be called Olwen, Bronwen or something else very similar!” His wife told him plainly, and finally, the acorn dropped. The surprised look which took hold of his face at that educational moment was a priceless one, and it drew a throaty laugh from his wife. “She is a perfect little *girl* Cadwy, and we have surely been blessed by Brigida herself!” Eirwen added with a deep sigh, and the fire of that same new and burgeoning maternal love which had grown alarmingly within her blazed now from her beautiful emerald eyes.

Cadwy stood stunned and surveyed his offspring anew. The most engaging smile erupted from them both at that delightful and edifying, first moment between *daughter* and father, and so he lifted her even higher, and he laughed with a savage pride.

“My Gods, I have a *daughter!* This whole country should be shaking in its boots now, for with the conjoined blood of the old enemy coursing through her little veins, this warrior-princess will one day rule all northern Prydein!” He declared theatrically, his neck flushing pink with the oath made for amusement as he held his daughter high, but his glittering eyes gave it credence and lent a certain gravitas to the oath, nonetheless.

“What about Angharad?” Eirwen proposed from her bed, and Cadwy’s smile was so broad you could see his gums.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I give you the honourable, fierce and unassailable Princess Angharad ferch Cadwy ap Cridas ap Calgorad ap Calgus Fawr of Selgofa and Albion!” Cadwy tried out the title proper for the first time and with the same sense of immense and unique pride. Polite applause broke out among these nurses, but it was quickly swollen and overpowered by the noise from these big and powerful men crowding this chamber, the leader of which was a beaming Hefin.

To a loud and tuneful, harmonised call of three horns coming from somewhere high in this fortress, the vibrant flags of celebration were unfurled above the roof of these soaring battlements, and the cheering of the werrin in Draenwen far below was loud, even from this remove. The news flashed outwards over greater Bidog like a wild summer fire along with the name; Angharad! The canny and fit, forward-thinking hunters, the industrious brewers, the corpulent butchers and the tired looking bakers of Draenwen all got up from their bracken, and regardless of the uncommon hour they went to work with knowing looks.

* * * * *

Here in the high north, it would be difficult for Galan’s many spies to differentiate between the whiter smoke of their smouldering thatches and the sparking, telltale and yellower smoke of their secret forges. These Western Islanders are a canny people, and they are a people who think far ahead and move slowly, but not before a great deal of communal deliberation and many months of intricate planning. They are infamously

stubborn in confirming these widely held beliefs, and these isolated, deeply religious and superstitious communities are now made up of many doughty but once disparate tribes. Over many generations, these once distinct clans had come together and had sought independence from the pure Brythonic state of Galedon for as long as anyone around here could remember. Having far more in common with the Iweriuan tribal families across the northern channel than their Epidian warlords who ruled all in these territories with an unbending *Brythonic* authority, these Westerners had come together once more to counter their perceived marginalisation, however incongruent and isolated some of them were. Many times they have tried, and many times they have failed. The people of this fractured coast have been slaughtered in their thousands and their leaders defeated in these all-inclusive and deeply lamented events in their history. At each fraught event, their doomed kings were killed in battle or captured and then either executed on the field or publicly hanged or burned alive in their vanquished towns in some sick rite. However, these people's stubbornness is legendary, and so, in the pursuit of their freedom once more and in the joint desire to establish a new identity from the blended but sacred fragments of their ancient and deeply similar cultures, another attempt at independence was in the final stages of preparation. Damp straw had been sprinkled on their well-hidden forge fires to disguise their warlike intent, and to hide the hundreds of superb steel weapons fabricated in their fiery crucibles from their Brythonic overlords. These crude and heavy, single-edged swords these people produced and were known for, along with all the pikes, spear and arrowheads required for this state-wide insurrection were being furiously produced by their village smiths in the utmost secrecy. Across this region, these hidden weapons were being gripped, bound, greased, and stored for imminent use by their proud village comrades, and this covert, furtive industry had been going on for weeks. These Western Islanders possessed generational knowledge in the forging of the very finest tools and weapons, and although highly secretive in this endeavour currently, they were known too to be able demonstrators of their excellent wares. The roasted ore was brought to

these elusive smiths covered in animal manure and in these people's handcarts, and each rock had to be washed thoroughly before it was then crushed and mixed with the waiting charcoal to a druid's prayer, and before the powdered human bones were then added by those wild priests. This sacred amalgam was then consigned to the hopeful, roaring flames of rebellious creation by their secretive smiths, and supported as always by the droning of their druids. At the great war council around the huge bale fire of their gathering, uniquely to this region the screeching of their bagpipes had eventually overpowered and replaced the singing of their bards, sending the crowd into paroxysms of wild shrieking and mindless dance. Bagpipes had arrived here from Iweriu many years ago with successive generations of bold scots, and the *skirl* of the massed pipes at the Western Islander's war council and the roaring of their raised voices had added immeasurably to this musical, maniacal declaration of war. The resulting illegal, secret yet deafening maelstrom of sound seemed to have thundered around these isolated coves and inlets with a powerful and protesting voice of its own for weeks. That wild and drunken night was now just a recent memory, and a normality had returned to these crofts and villages, on the surface at least. Nothing could be done about the palls of yellow smoke however, and neither could the enduring pealing of their smiths' hammers, which danced across this fraught region like delighted musical sprites be disguised as anything but. Their bell like notes would ring among the many bays, rocky peninsulas and barren creeks of this tortured coast, and would then drift across its beaches and headlands with any breeze in a concert of defiant chimes. These determined northerners persisted regardless, as they had a whole host of gathering warriors to arm and an imminent uprising of independence to fight, but there had been one vital ceremony to complete before their revolution could be initiated fully.

At the very moment their druids confirmed midnight, far out to sea and in full view of all these busy coastal communities, the merest flicker of flame pierced the impenetrable darkness. Almost a mile out to sea, a diffused flare of light erupted on the mist shrouded crown of Bryn Eigh; the conical

mountain rising from the heart of Ynys Eigh and surrounded by the wildest of seas. This was the deeply sacred, outpost island which braved the Sound of Rhum out in the rough and tempestuous Hebridean Ocean, and it had been used for this mysterious ceremony for as long as men had walked and hunted these rugged lands. These myriad islets and islands scattered around this deeply fractured coastline were known together and throughout Prydain as the Western Isles, and something secret and only quietly disclosed between them had drawn all these scattered werrin together, here this dark and historic night. That embryonic flame atop sacred Bryn Eigh guttered with this spiteful wind, and it almost died at birth as so many living creatures in this harsh and hostile environment did, as it was a daily and unending fight just for survival in these cold northern extremes. That emergent flame although threatened was supported spiritually by the multitude which had gathered around it on that distant hill and all the people along this windswept coast who had come together in their tribal groups to witness its birth, and it too fought for life. Flaring as it caught the oil drenched timbers around it, that votive flame roared into rude and healthy life, spewing flames, heat and dense smoke suddenly into the star littered midnight sky of ascension above it. The voices of the druids with their attendant bards, and the excited chattering of the werrin on this headland all rose with that distant fire of fate out to sea. As always, these were led and supported, occasionally even overpowered by their ranks of colourful and furious pipers, and these clifftops were swept by their squealing notes and the raised voices of these people. That distant flame was fed by this wind now, and it soared with bright new flame from that high mountain top, and which could be seen now for miles around. That 'royal coronation' beacon was precisely thirty-three feet tall and had consumed dozens of local trees in its construction, requiring many perilous rowing boat journeys to and from this mainland to build it. The labour had been worth it to all those exhausted people now gathered around its feet, and to these equally celebrating people on the cliffs overlooking this whole coast. Many hundreds of aristocratic and fur swathed nobles could be seen lining that

conical hillside, all assembled to watch the enormous fire roar up from the crown of that sacred islet. All these spectators watched that sacred flame rise bright into the heavens, confirming that a new king of the Western Isles had been crowned upon it, and the response from all these people was loud and increasingly wild. A man of great local power had finally taken the walk against the sun at midnight around the flaming crown of that holy island as so many had before, and now all these people had a leader to follow once again.

The grey and turbulent waters rushing around Ynys Eigh danced in blazing colours tonight and from the raging fire upon the pinnacle of its mount. This whole island along with the entire hillside below the roaring beacon of mutinous optimism on its crown came alive with dancing, singing, and piping westerners, as now the rite was complete, the mead, the beer and the spirit-of-life had been brought out. Above these celebrating lords, ladies and courtiers, the enormous bear skinned and beringed warrior at the very top of this aristocratic pyramid of people held his muscular arms wide, and this huge man now bore the twisted wire crown of gold on his big and bearded head as he looked down upon his enjoined people. He looked to be a man capable of taking their claims and their secret, warlike ambitions forward far more effectively than the rather limited Brude Bredus ever had. And so, these rebellious, spirited people were joyous in their hope filled celebrations under this new monarch, under his roaring balefire of ascension and under these cold coronation stars of Lughnas.

One pair of shrouded eyes, glimmering above a toothy blue tattoo also witnessed those distant flames rising atop Ynys Eigh. This impressive, habitually hidden man had also heard the distant but shrill pipe music weaving on the wind and had noted too the significance of the melodies played. The multitude of praying people on these clifftops, all their priests and tribal leaders supporting that blaze and supporting this uprising and the illegal coronation they had just witnessed could not have been missed by this ghostly individual. Watching laconically from the trees nearby and a hundred *reeds* from that thronged cliffside, this tall and muscular, highly

secretive warrior was dressed in a vaguely shimmering mantle, but nobody noticed as he vanished back into the shadows shaking his head as no one had seen that invisible man arrive.

* * * * *

Gŵyr Brith Fawr and his fearless Gadwyr prepared themselves for battle against the Roman dogs once more and with great relish. Their crossed leather belts gleamed in this harsh yellow sunlight as did everything else in this totally alien country, and it was dazzling. The heat was so astonishing to these northern Prydeinig warriors, it had been this they had found most difficult to overcome soon after their arrival, gasping for breath like guppies until they got more used to it. However, their incredibly wealthy hosts could perform miracles, and these remarkable people could actually produce solid rocks of ice in lead lined oaken chests. In a land as hot as any oven, this was the strongest of magic, and the Gadwyr had been utterly amazed. With excellent and experienced use of this wonder of all wonders and gallons of fresh spring water, the Gadwyr had been made comfortable in the great and utterly strange caravan to war which had brought them here. They had travelled in sumptuous and shaded, silk-lined barges which looked like oversized sofas, and they had eaten the most exotic and unknown foods as they journeyed across shimmering oceans of burning red sand. Each great covered sled had been drawn by a team of thirty, unfamiliar looking and strangely knobble-backed oxen, and these too had intrigued these red haired and marble-white, blue tattooed warriors. The Gadwyr were given a tour of one barren, sandy acre of land and one rectangular, sandstone fort after another, but in the utmost comfort and with the greatest of celebrations at each arrival. With delicious, unknown fruits and tongue-stinging, strangely spiced meats to consume and delight them as they travelled, and with the enchantment of iced water to comfort them and to slake their great thirsts, these gigantic warriors had prevailed.

Life-giving and life preserving water was of a singular priority in this burning land, and it had to be transported from many miles away. It was

brought in great clay pots to their war camp and on the most ungainly and ugly looking, long-legged beasts, who were forced by the Gods of this strange country to carry a hill upon their backs as well as those huge jars of water. *Camals* their hosts called them, and they were hardy, stringy beasts with long and serious faces but which thrived in this energy sapping and desiccating environment. This all-enveloping heat which at the height of the brightest of days was like Bel's furnace itself, forcing *all* men to seek shade even the coal black and head swathed tribesmen who rode on those alien, bridge backed and ugly beasts for uncountable miles. On this vast, dry, and dehydrated territory of sand ocean, somewhere in a land known only to them as the *middle-east* and in support of their Persian paymasters, these long travelled Gadwyr crouched behind a series of tall and grass topped hills of this soft but furiously burning sand, eagerly awaiting the battle to come. There was little air in this Gods' forsaken desert, and what there was had clearly just escaped from a smith's furnace, as it burned the throat, the lips and both nostrils to breathe it in. However, regardless or perhaps in response to these unique challenges, Brith's pale eyes came alive at the distant sound of unfamiliar horns, and that same ominous light of impending death flared deep in the eyes of these monstrous men around him. Their unconquered and legendary leader made the signal they had all been waiting for, and as one, three thousand of the mighty Gadwyr rose up and trotted out onto this vast ocean of sizzling sand before them, which seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions into a shimmering infinity. There arrayed before them were the deeply hated, glittering and arrogant ranks of Rome, and they had clearly come here in all their glory to do battle against the Gadwyr's hospitable and generous patrons this day, to spill more blood, and to claim many more heads and more loot to the glory of Rome, but this airless day promised them a fearful surprise. The Gadwyr had come here to oppose them and to slaughter them, not just from an enduring hatred but for the purest of Persian gold and in service to their most ancient cousins. As they formed up in their lines and hefted their huge axes, the strangest chariots surged from their wings suddenly in two huge,

voluminous clouds of sand, and these monstrous and blue swirled Gadwyr began to smile terribly. They carried no banner as they needed no introduction, and once formed up on this hot sand, their huge barrel chests swelled as they roared out their own savage battlecry, in their own unique way of introduction and declared hostile intent. They brandished their enormous, twin edged battle axes of such murderous reputé, and bending their knees, their pale eyes shone now with a hard and terrible gleam as they bellowed their arrival at the tops of their voices. “Gadwyr GrutArd! Gadwyr GrutArd! Gadwyr GrutArd!” Three thousand rough voices roared out as one, and stamping their feet to this deadly tempo, their warcries shattered the hot and unblemished blue sky above them.

There was a perceived consternation in the front ranks at this ominous sight and at that thunderous sound, and these Roman legionaries became restless somewhat and started to fidget. The word ‘Gadwyre’ was uttered forlornly by some seasoned and suddenly terrified Romans at the front ranks, and it was passed around the rows of pale faces at these suddenly wide-awake lines like a black token of decimation. These once confident but suddenly unnerved Romans in their identical shiny helmets, peering over the tops of their tall and rectangular scutum all bore the same terrified expression, as the name *Gadwyre* which flashed among them now had become one of horrific legend. That name had come to symbolise a notorious and unwritten myth, one which had flown recently through the far-flung troops of Rome like a red bird of nightmare, clear across the Roman world and beyond. How those notoriously merciless giants of professional war had arrived here of all places was immaterial, as those mysterious and ever grinning, battle loving mercenaries from wild Pritania had become synonymous with monstrous and unavoidable death, and these heavily sweating Romans feared them. Appearing as a phantom, alien host through the shimmering heat haze ahead, these old-world warriors came barrelling into these Romans’ new world once more. With their white teeth blazing through their red beards and their glittering axes twirling, they made a shocking sight. The hot sand trembled and began to shift underfoot at the wild and terrifying approach of these

blood-soaked goliaths of unrestrained butchery, and as their optios could be heard screaming for discipline from behind them in their rear ranks, sweat began to drip from these Romans' chinstraps at the front. Fuelled by unbelievable rumours from the survivors of Caesar's infamous invasions of mythical Prittan and their own frantic imaginations, they feared these red haired and outrageous warriors implacably, and their feet began to shuffle backwards in this hot powder almost without thought and regardless of their officers' shouting and prodding from the rear. These were indeed flame haired, ground devouring monsters of old war charging at them so swiftly it defied belief, and they had obviously travelled uncountable miles to do battle here today, with unparalleled savagery and the utmost glee.

Their strange but accommodating Persian paymasters cheered their welcome to the fight loudly, and three thousand of the most merciless and feared Brythonic strike force ever known thundered across this hot sand to their bidding and to their own fates. These massively barrel chested and blue swirled Gadwyr of northern Galedon and mysterious, virtually unknown Prydein stormed across this scorching sand at an unbelievable pace given the oppressive heat, their double-headed axes spinning and their long and red, plaited hair flaming joyously behind them. These hugely muscled and madly grinning warriors were almost sprinting across this burning sand when they smashed like a colossal iron hammer into the hurriedly adjusting vanguard of these Roman formations. Many of the horrified expressions were frozen on those Roman faces forever moments later, as when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object....

Diweddu - The End.



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‘Tread lightly, harm none, and find your own true path to
awen....’

Eifion Wyn Williams.

Historical note.

In 52 BC, just two years later and when Pompey's theatre in Rome was finally dedicated, Caesar perpetrated in Gaul what remains to this day one of the worst slaughters of innocent people in all man's bloody history. In his complete destruction of that Continent following King Vercingetorix' defeat, Caesar let his troops loose on the ordinary people of Gaul and who had already surrendered. Taking his professional killers 'off the leash', Caesar gave them free reign to plunder and to murder with impunity, and the results are difficult to comprehend these days. In the total obliteration of more than eight hundred towns and cities, Caesar's troops moved across Gaul like a mincing machine, slaughtering over a million men, women and children in an unbelievable bloodbath which went on for months, with town after town being subjected to the most brutal and uncontrollable butchery imaginable. We cannot comprehend the horrors perpetrated across that Celtic continent on those mostly pastoral families and in that dreadful period of annihilation by the '*Yellow Dog of Rome*'. A million slaves were also taken in those mindless and unconscionable massacres of one civilian population after another without let. All Gaul was left in flames and running with blood to Caesar's unending and merciless persecution of its people, killing more than a quarter of its inhabitants in the ruthless process. This was ethnic cleansing on an industrial scale and in its most brutal and primal form. The massacre of more than half a million lost souls on the Plain of Oss three years previously had clearly not sated the general's appetite for the mass-slaughter of civilians under truce, nor did the rivers of blood resulting from his murderous actions elsewhere placate him. Caesar must have been a very disturbed and an unfulfilled conqueror if he did not finally fulfil his desire for horror and for blood once and for all in the red and overflowing gutters of Gaul.

Regardless of Caesar's military brilliance, his dazzling ambition and in stark contrast to his prosaic writing done in safety and on *considered* reflection, he could never dodge the revealing truths in the unbelievable numbers of his victims. At least he got a thorough trouncing from Lludd, Caswallawn, Cadallan and all those brave Prydeinig warriors on both his visits here, and Caesar; the *Yellow Dog of Rome* never set foot in Prydein again after his second, equally fruitless invasion where he was outplayed and outmanoeuvred by Caswallawn; a Kymric king of the Southern Brythons, ruler of Lloegr and a son of the legendary Beli Mawr. However, all that which followed, and all that was perpetrated by

Caesar's ensuing countrymen a century later on a beleaguered Prydein, and all which then persisted for almost half a millennium afterward has been consigned to the annals of our glorious, truly ancient history and it makes fascinating reading.

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My big copy of 'Y Geiriadur Mawr'; The complete Welsh-English & English-Welsh dictionary which I have owned since primary school.

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“Territa quaesitis ostendit terga Britannis”.

‘With pride he fought the Britons but when found, dreaded
their force and fled the hostile ground.’
Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (Lucan, commenting on Caesar’s
failures).

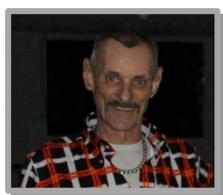
Please also visit my webpage; <https://iffy88227.wixsite.com/sonsofbelimawr> where you can register your interest in my work. The website offers a great deal of back information about the research and construction of these historical novels, with a FREE 78-page Historical Supplement you can download, giving the reader a deeper understanding of the era. My website also features extensive photographic galleries, including the relevant locations.

For a more pictorial supplement, please visit my Pinterest site;
<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/EifionWynWilliams/> for many associated graphics but also for a beautiful pictorial tour of this magical, most wonderful country; Thank you all!

Cymru am byth!

Eifion Wyn Williams.

“A whole troop of foreigners would not be able to
withstand a single Celt, if he called his wife to his assistance!” -
Amicus Marcelling.



Eifion Wyn Williams - Author Biography.

I am a 68-year-old Welshman, father and grandfather living in rural Buckinghamshire, England. I was brought up in Snowdonia by a family of teachers, historians and poets, and my father, one of nine children was the headmaster of my infant and junior school. This was Llanllechid Primary in Rachub, a tiny stone and slate village situated high in the cold foothills of Snowdon and above the small town of Bethesda. With so many uncles and aunts (four of whom were teachers) and countless cousins, I was lucky enough to receive a *proper* Welsh education, and I was imbued from infancy with a deep and abiding love for our ancient and glorious *true* history not the fabricated, deeply corrupted, highly politicised and Anglicised history *all* the children of Britain have been force-fed by our English masters since the 19th century.

My blind Taid (Grandfather) was an orator and a storyteller of note, and I recall vividly our huge family squashed into the front parlour in Nain and Taid's terraced house on Madoc Street Porthmadoc listening to his tales. The whole family would be there for these historical stories with all the doors thrown open, and the tiny little 'two-up, two-down' terraced house would be jam packed. Told with an elder teacher's love of his language and his history, and in a deep and musical baritone I can hear to this day, he was inspired to verbosity by his blindness, but we could all tell he enjoyed it. I can still smell the coal fire and the whisky, the sweet sherry and the fragrant smoke that curled from his long pipe as he spun wondrous images before our eyes, firing our already vivid imaginations with tales of dark druids and magic, glimmering warriors like Lludd Llaw Ereint (silver-hand) and Lleu Llaw Gyffes (agile-handed), both of whom feature in these stories. Always dressed in a pinstriped three-piece suit, Taid would stand by the mantelpiece, puff his pipe and talk for hours whilst my brother and I would sit on the floor in one corner, completely entranced. He spoke of God-like, ancient warriors like Beli Mawr, even both great Arthurs and a huge, terrifying giant called Yspaddaden Pencawr who lived nearby and actually *ate* naughty children! This then was the foundation to my historical and my cultural education which is of course a never-ending process.

I have been writing creatively for over fifty years, and these truly ancient stories of my grandfather have been rattling around inside me for as long as I can remember. So, a few years ago I gave up my work as a freelance writer and set out to commit some of these ancient tales to text. The main themes I wanted to write about were in the 'Mabinogion' era, which include the Romans and Julius Caesar's invasions of 55 & 54 BC. So, I set out to research these ancient and untold events and with a determination to bring these almost forgotten stories back to life and into the 21st century. In that time, I have managed to produce a trilogy of historical fiction novels encompassing these portentous happenings from more than two millennia ago and which I have entitled Iron Blood & Sacrifice; (The Sons of Beli Mawr, The Sacking of Bidog & Return of the Yellow Dog). I am hoping this trilogy of historical novels will appeal to a broad readership and not just those who are interested in our ancient history, as they are novels of adventure, love, humour and bloody conquest at the end of the day. They also have an old-fashioned streak of romanticism running through

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them, as they were after all written by an incurable romantic in a proud Welsh tradition.

Please go to <https://iffy88227.wixsite.com/sonsofbelimawr> for updates on new releases and to join the 'Iron Blood & Sacrifice' community!